

The Irish Lands Acts, Surname Persistence, and the Political Economy of Zoning

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Research Proposal

Motivation

Local land-use regulation restricts housing supply and, at the same time, creates large gains for the owners of rezoned land. Two accounts of who controls it lead to different predictions. In one, incumbent homeowners block development to protect the value of their housing (Ortalo-Magné and Prat, 2014), so supply falls. In the other, landowners use political connections to obtain rezoning for their own land (Murray and Frijters, 2016), so land is reallocated and total supply need not fall. Ireland provides an appropriate setting to disentangle the competing theories. Because zoning is a reserved function of elected local councillors, the system is historically susceptible to landowner capture as evidenced by a public inquiry into corrupt rezoning payments in 1990s Dublin (Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments, 2012). To identify the long-run roots of this political influence, the project leverages the idiosyncratic timing of the Irish Land Acts (1870–1909), which transferred property rights to tenant farmers at different times across different estates. The question is whether families who bought their land early are more present in local land-use decisions today than families who bought later, and whether that presence is used to restrict housing or to capture rezoning gains.

Related Literature and Gap

One strand of literature concerns land reform, landed elites and persistence. Guinnane and Miller (1997) analyze the Irish Land Acts and their limits, and de Bromhead and Lyons (2023) show that a different Irish housing intervention, the Labourers Acts, continues to shape the distribution of population. Baland and Robinson (2008) show how landlord control over voters shaped politics in Chile, Acemoglu and Robinson (2008) model how elites invest in *de facto* power to preserve their position after institutional change, and Ferraz, Finan, and Martinez-Bravo (2024) study local political power, elite control and long-run development in Brazil. None of these studies local land-use decisions.

Another branch of literature uses surnames and family ties to measure persistence. Rare surnames track families in wealth and status over many generations (Clark and Cummins, 2015; Güell, Rodríguez Mora and Telmer, 2015; Barone and Mocetti, 2021). In politics, Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder (2009) and Querubin (2016) show, with instrumental-variable and close-election designs, that holding office raises the chance that relatives hold office later. This work measures wealth and office-holding, not decisions over land.

The third literature is the political economy of land use. Regulation sometimes raises house prices where demand is strong (Hilber and Vermeulen, 2016), homeowner voting can sustain restrictive policy (Ortalo-Magné and Prat, 2014), political competition and developer lobbying affect how much land local governments designate for development (Solé-Ollé and Viladecans-Marsal, 2012), and connected landowners received most of the land rezoned in Queensland programme (Murray and Frijters, 2016). These studies observe connections or political conditions in the present, so they cannot say where local networks come from, and they rarely test restriction against capture in the same setting. To my knowledge, no study links a historical transfer of property rights to present-day land-use decisions through family lineages.

Setting and Hypotheses

Under the Land Acts the state advanced loans to tenants to buy their holdings. Uptake was uneven in time. By March 1910, advances under the 1903 Act (£35.3 million) exceeded those under all earlier Acts combined (£23.9 million) (House of Commons, 1911), so purchasers before the 1903 Act form a distinct earlier group. Parliamentary returns record, for each holding, its situation, vendor, purchaser and advance (House of Commons, 1905). Zoning is decided through development plans. Making or varying a plan is a reserved function of the elected members, who are to consider proper planning and sustainable development, and the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010 required each plan to include a core strategy.

With this in mind, three hypotheses are tested (see Table 1 for predictions). First, under restriction, early-buying families resist new housing generally. Second, under capture, they obtain rezoning for their own land and resist only sites that compete with it. Lastly, under no lineage effect, differences in political presence reflect selection unrelated to purchase timing, and it is the null that the design should be able to reject.

TABLE 1: TESTABLE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Outcome Variable	Supply Restriction	Elite Capture	No Lineage Effect
<i>Political & Administrative Presence</i>			
Lineage Representation	+	+	0
<i>Zoning & Planning Outcomes</i>			
Rezoning Success Rate	0	+	0
Frequency of Objections	+ (Broad)	+ (Targeted)	0
Zoned Capacity Utilization	—	0	0

Notes: (+) indicates a higher incidence or positive effect, (-) indicates a lower incidence or negative effect, and (0) indicates no effect or no change.

A finding of capture without lower supply could imply that policy aimed only at restricting objections misses the main channel, restriction would support reforms that reduce local veto power, and a null result (no lineage effect) would indicate that early purchase left no trace in local land-use politics.

Empirical Strategy

The unit of analysis is a surname in a place, so that family characteristics and local conditions can both be held fixed, in contrast with comparing areas by their average exposure.

From the parliamentary returns, each purchaser surname in a townland is classified as early (advance before the 1903 Act took effect in November 1903) or late. Records are linked to the 1901 and 1911 censuses and aggregated to surname s in Local Electoral Area (LEA) l , giving Early_{sl} , the share of that surname's holdings l that were bought early. I use rare surnames and weight by local rarity to limit false matches (Clark and Cummins, 2015; Güell et al., 2015).

In the first step, using the censuses, I compare early and late buyers within the same townland on landholding and status indicators in 1911. If early buyers are not better off, the premise of multi-generational accumulation is not supported.

Second step includes regressing Y_{sl} , the number of times surname s appears among councillors elected in l from 1999 to 2024, and among submitters of rezoning requests:

$$Y_{sl} = \alpha_s + \delta_l + \beta \text{Early}_{sl} + X'_{sl} \gamma + \varepsilon_{sl} \quad (1)$$

Here, α_s is a surname fixed effect, which absorbs everything fixed about a family such as occupation or reputation, δ_l is an LEA fixed effect, which takes in local conditions, and X contains Land War agitation, land valuation and distance to the city. The coefficient β is therefore identified from the same surname having bought earlier in one place than in another, which depends on when the relevant estates were sold. Because sale timing may reflect tenant wealth or agitation, I instrument it with landlord death or succession shortly before 1903, Death_{sl} , built from owner histories in the Landed Estates Database and probate records:

$$\text{Early}_{sl} = \kappa_s + \lambda_l + \pi \text{Death}_{sl} + X'_{sl} \phi + v_{sl} \quad (2)$$

The first-stage coefficient π tests relevance. The exclusion restriction is that owner mortality affects later outcomes only through sale timing, which I assess by testing balance on agitation and land valuation. Counts are estimated by Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood. If owner death rates can be found for too few estates, I estimate the first equation without the instrument and interpret β as an association within lineage and place, assessing sensitivity to selection by adding controls sequentially.

As a third step, I look at each zoning request i in a plan round and let Match_i indicate that the submitter's surname is an early lineage in that area:

$$\text{Accept}_i = \alpha_{p(i)} + \theta \text{Match}_i + W_i' \rho + u_i \quad (3)$$

The effect $\alpha_{p(i)}$ is a fixed effect for the plan round and LEA, so requests are compared when competing for the same decision, and W holds request characteristics such as size and distance to serviced land. The elite capture hypothesis (see [Table 1](#)) predicts $\theta > 0$, and supply restriction one would be consistent with $\theta = 0$. The same matching is applied to observers of other people’s housing applications, which separates blanket resistance from the selective one.

For extensions, where data allow, the completions relative to zoned residential capacity at LEA level would test supply restriction’s hypothesis prediction of lower supply. Also, Dublin can be added using steps 2 and 3 without the instrument.

Nevertheless, some limitations might still persist. For instance, surnames proxy kinship imperfectly because of women’s name changes. Common names and migration, the variation in availability of names in planning records by authority, and results being reported at the surname level in line with data protection rules will remain some of the few obstacles that are challenging to overcome no matter the identification strategy proposed.

As far as robustness checks are concerned, randomization inference could help ensure that conclusions do not rely on asymptotic standard errors in sparse count data. The check would be implemented by reassigning early and late labels at random within estate and county cells to build the null distribution of β , following Young (2019).

Match precision and dilution can be tracked, too. Effects should weaken as matching moves from exact townland-level to county-level surname matches, and should be stronger in LEAs with low in-migration, where lineages are better preserved. If not, the estimate reflects surname frequency, not lineage.

Outcomes

Purchaser names, townlands and advance dates come from the parliamentary returns of advances, supplemented by records of Congested Districts of Board sales in the west. Households and surnames come from the 1901 and 1911 censuses, and owner histories from the Landed Estates Database, which covers Connacht, Munster, and parts of Ulster, including the main sample of Cork, Limerick and Galway. Councillors and candidates come from published local-election results, and rezoning submissions and councillor amendments from each authority’s development-plan records, where submitter names are published. Controls come from Royal Irish Constabulary agitation records and Griffith’s Valuation. Planning applications from 2010 (National Planning Application Database) and completions (Central Statistics Office) serve the extensions.

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