

Foreign Activists

In May of 2018, Ireland held a referendum on abortion; Irish citizens voted to repeal the eighth amendment to the country's constitution. This meant that the government would be able to overhaul an abortion law that was among the most restrictive in Europe.

Just before the referendum, hundreds of foreign activists arrived in Ireland to advocate for the “no” or the “yes” side. For example, young Americans working with the Colorado-based non-profit Let Them Live travelled to Ireland to encourage voters to keep abortion illegal. Critics were very publicly weary of this sort of outside influence, often making two distinctive arguments: Firstly, it is up to the Irish people (and perhaps only the Irish people) to decide for themselves how they wish to govern their society. Secondly, foreign activists often do not understand the relevant material and cultural history in Ireland (e.g., of birth control or abortion access, etc.), or the distinctive types of arguments that the Irish people are struggling with.

Others argued that such activism is not just morally permissible, but that it is praiseworthy. Proponents might cite Martin Luther King, Jr., who argued that “An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” King, in the context of the American Civil Rights Movement, was obviously talking about people who live in the United States traveling from one state to another, but some could argue that his ideas apply internationally. His underlying point does seem to apply to the present day—when technology, social media, international trade, climate change, and global economies have made us more connected across more kinds of borders than ever. As King admonished, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outside agitator’ idea.”

Many find it deeply troubling when foreign groups are shipped in by well-resourced foreign organizations, or when these organizations pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to fund these activists or promote their causes in the media. Many in the United States, for instance, are uneasy or even outraged at the thought that Russian-funded ads and activists on social media played a role in the Presidential election of 2016, and are projected to play a role in 2020 as well.

On another hand, we may have reason to be cautious of restricting or outlawing foreign activism, too. Sometimes, governments accused of violating human rights use accusations of terrorism to rebuff global NGOs and advocacy groups. Human rights advocates and activists have been arrested around the world under this guise. Countries occasionally go as far as to forbid foreign agencies or groups from entering their borders, observing their elections, or donating money to local causes. One might worry that this allows governments to abuse and exploit their citizens, violate international agreements, and obfuscate their bad behavior.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is there a morally relevant difference between activists traveling to a different country to advocate for a cause and foreign groups funding local causes?
2. Does it matter if the activists flying into Ireland before the referendum are of Irish descent? Or if they are Americans who have lived in Ireland for many years prior to the referendum?
3. If having outside groups allowed to advocate locally is justified in some cases but not others, how can we distinguish between these cases?
4. Does a government ever have the right to bar foreign activists, or to block foreign ads on social media?

