

# Celtic connections: reading the roots of Biden and Trump



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As elections become more driven by the marketability of the personalities of individual candidates, so increases the emphasis placed on their backgrounds. Personal narratives are brought to the fore, invoking a rich inheritance of adversity and triumph. For all that, there has been a lack of sustained attention given to the claimed and projected heritage myths around presidents and presidential campaigns. This gap in the literature is surprising, since national ancestry has frequently been a factor, not just in the image-building around candidates, but also in the negative mobilisation of ethnic and religious belonging. Examples range from the anti-Irish Catholic strains in the campaign against Kennedy to the racist undertones of the “birther” movement against Obama.

## Biden in Ireland

In spite of historic anti-Catholic prejudices, scholars have long highlighted the power of the Irish American vote. In this context, the Democrat candidate Joe Biden has made a virtue of his Irish forebears, quoting Seamus Heaney in speeches and using the first presidential debate to assert an ancestral heritage characterized by tenacity. Indeed, his Secret Service codename is widely named as “Celtic.” Biden campaigners, moreover, established an “Irish Americans for Biden” committee, describing Biden as a “fellow Irish American” and “a friend of Ireland and Irish America.” In Ireland itself, obvious links with previous Democrats are highlighted, with journalist Niall O’Dowd predicting “the most Irish election since John F. Kennedy.” Also, a hook for a sidebar story was provided by a local relative eccentrically campaigning for Biden in his “homeland.” However, the bulk of coverage in Ireland centres on what importance may be attached to Biden’s “5/8ths” Irishness in securing U.S. votes, and the final weekend of the campaign sees the *Irish Examiner* emphasise the potential of the Irish diaspora in the potential swing states of Florida and Ohio, along with the ultimately significant Pennsylvania. In terms of its utility, Biden’s association with Ireland draws myths around self-betterment, social class and a culture of religious observation. These are discourses that reach beyond the Democrat constituency to appeal to elements of the conservative right, while remaining entangled within complex mythologies around the left-leaning fight for Irish self-determination.

## Trump in Scotland

While incumbent President Trump’s ancestral association with Scotland is more palpable – his mother was born on the Scottish island of Lewis – the greater focus within Scotland is on his business interests in the local leisure and hospitality sector. While there have been strained links between

Trump’s political style and the often rancorous politics of Scotland, the political consensus in Scotland is some way to the left of the President. While Trump has a minority of well-wishes – a recent poll found that 15% of Scots would give him their vote – Scots media tends to portray Trump disobliquely, as a cartoonish blowhard. In the public sphere more broadly, an iconic image of Scottish comedian Janey Godley bearing a handwritten sign insulting Trump is widely shared whenever there is deliberation of the president’s character. The irreverent humour enabled by Trump’s singular personality and demeanour even extends to conventional news coverage, with local Scottish newspaper the *Ayr Advertiser* producing a parodic cliché of parochialism in the Trump-related headline “Turnberry hotelier tests positive for coronavirus”.

## Conclusion

As attitudes towards Trump in Scotland tend to show, shared heritage does not necessarily equate with goodwill, and remains subject to deeper ideological commitments. Moreover, the previous focus by Trump on President Obama’s heritage points to a malign articulation between national origins and deeper cultural and racial prejudices. While discourses of Scots/Irish origins sit safely within a conservative United States mythology, a more diverse candidacy seem likely to generate more complex and dynamic set of alternatives. Future research should be alert to the shifting racial and ethnic hierarchies within which these heritage claims are circulated and reproduced.