

# Iceland's Pirate Party (Píratar) – In Permanent Opposition?

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## Abstract

This research examines the rapid growth in popularity of Iceland's Pirate Party (Piratur) by analyzing recent election results and public opinion polling (2013-17) on the popularity and ideological placement of the Pirate Party. We find that most respondents viewed the Pirate Party as centrist, and the majority of the respondents were neutral in their view of the party, although negative assessments rose by 2017.

**Keywords:** pirate party, elections in Iceland, public opinion, freedom of information

## 1. Introduction

Although Iceland's Pirate Party (Piratar) held a mere three parliamentary seats in early 2015, polls showed its support increasing from 13 to 30% in a few weeks from February to April of 2015, with a peak of 38.6%. This party thus became Iceland's most popular party for a nearly unbroken period of seventeen months, leading up to the October 2016 elections. (*Iceland Monitor*, 2016a). These unexpected poll results led many political observers to expect that the Piratar party would be a major participant in any coalition government following the election (Leruth 2016a). However, in these 2016 general elections, the Piratar Party received only 14.5% of the popular vote (third place) and 10 seats, out of 63 parliamentary seats (tied for second place). Nonetheless, these election results were a modest success for the party, as their popular vote share increased 9.4% from the previous 2013 elections, and they gained seven seats (*Iceland Monitor* 2016a; Leruth 2016b).

Following this 2016 election, the process of forming a coalition government proved to be difficult and lengthy. The Pirate Party was included in these negotiations, and at one point, its leader was given a mandate to form a government (*The Guardian*, 2016; *Iceland Monitor*, 2016b), but was unsuccessful. The ultimate three-party coalition was not created until January of 2017, and did not include the Piratar party (*Iceland Review*, 2017)

In the subsequent elections in 2017, called due to yet another governmental scandal, the Piratar party, gained only 9.2% of the vote and lost four seats. (*Iceland Monitor*, 2017) The remainder of this article centers on the history and platform of this party, and also examines its likely supporters, and public perception of its ideology.

## 2. History of the Piratar Party

Iceland's Piratar Party is part of a larger Pirate movement across the world, spawned by the emergence of the first Pirate party in Sweden. In 2006, the Pirate Party was developed by Richard Falkvinge as a response to the litigation against the popular website, "The Pirate Bay" (TPB), an extremely popular "torrent" website in Sweden. Although not illegal, torrents are an easy way to share large files over the internet, allowing these sites to be used for activities like sharing music, television shows, or films, without regard to national copyright laws. Because of this, sites such as TPB are often viewed at with suspicion from the various entities which hold the intellectual property rights to artistic endeavors. (Torrent Freak, 2017)

Within a few days of starting his petition, Falkvinge had received so many signatures that he and others began to think more strategically about a widespread response to the Swedish government's attempt to shut down TPB. To the surprise of most political observers, Falkvinge soon had gathered enough signatures to start a new political party in Sweden. Since then, the Pirate Party has become an international phenomenon, with chapters in 69 countries around the world. These activists also formed a European Pirate Party so they could run candidates in the 2014 European elections. (EUOBSERVER, 2012). The realization that governments were able to shut down websites and hinder the flow of information galvanized many individuals throughout the world. One such nation was Iceland, with its rich tradition of

supporting the freedom of information in general. Iceland also experiences the highest rate of internet access in the world. (Freedom House, 2020)

### 3. Freedom of Information in Iceland

In the past decade there have been at least three examples of the Icelandic commitment to freedom of information: 1) the creation of laws modeled on global examples to protect the freedom of information; 2) the reaction to a court order shutting down specific websites; and 3) the attempt to grant Edwin Snowden citizenship.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of the Pirate Party is that Iceland, in general, is a leading country in promoting freedom of information. In this decade, its Parliament began designing a new set of domestic laws to create a haven for journalists, publishers, and threatened media. In June 2010, the Icelandic Parliament unanimously passed the “Icelandic Modern Media Initiative” (IMMI). The IMMI proposed to turn Iceland into the leading media haven with the strongest protections for journalists and publishers in the world by amending at least 13 current Icelandic laws. The Icelandic Parliament’s vote began a process of changing Icelandic law through borrowing the most stringent national legal codes governing these aspects of information policy from around the world. The IMMI specifically changed Icelandic law to match various aspects of U.S., European Union (EU), Belgian, British, Estonian, Georgian, Norwegian, Scottish, and Swedish laws. The IMMI cites the example of WikiLeaks, which distributes its infrastructure across national contexts to take advantage of strong legal protections for journalists, sources, and publishers and made at least seven substantial changes to Icelandic law. (Reporters without Borders, 2010; Beyer, 2014)

After the creation of the IMMI, in October 2014, the Reykjavík District Court issued an injunction which effectively ordered certain internet service providers (Vodafone and Hringdu) to block their customers access to five domains; deildu.net, deildu.com, thepiratebay.se, thepiratebay.sx and thepiratebay.org – all of which are file sharing sites. The injunction was issued pursuant to a lawsuit filed by the Performing Rights Society of Iceland (STEF) which manages and administers the copyrights of various artists and collects royalties on their behalf. Other injunctions followed shortly and effectively blocked access to the abovementioned domains. STEF then joined forces with other copyright associations and reached an agreement that the injunction should be interpreted to block all domains remotely linked to Pirate Bay or Deildu.net without the need for a specific injunction (Beyer and McKelvey, 2015)

The expansion of the court order was anticipated by one Pirate Party Member of Parliament, Helgi Hrafn Gunnarsson, who criticized the ruling. In a speech in Althingi (the Icelandic parliamentary building), Gunnarsson warned Parliament of two things: first, the injunction would not have the desired effect of blocking access to the sites and would therefore result in the necessity of resorting to more extreme measures. Secondly, Gunnarsson warned that even rudimentary knowledge of how the internet functions would be made to look suspicious (Pirate Party, 2021)

Both of Gunnarsson’s predictions have now come to fruition. For instance, shortly after his first speech, Gunnarsson was accused of aiding and abetting a crime simply for saying that it was easy to circumvent the injunction by changing DNS servers. In light of the far-reaching measures foreseen by the recent agreement, Gunnarsson’s first prediction – that copyrights associations would quickly find the need to resort to more extreme measures – has now also occurred. (Pirate Party, 2015)

Finally, the more symbolic expression of this Icelandic embrace of freedom of information, occurred in 2013, when a bill was introduced in Parliament that would, if passed, immediately grant Edward Snowden Icelandic citizenship. Gunnarsson proposed the bill and it was co-sponsored by the other Pirate Party parliament members, and leaders of the Left-Green Movement, Bright Future, and Social Democratic Alliance. However, a vote to determine whether the bill could be added to the legislative agenda did not receive enough support, (Pirate Party 2021)

### 4. The Pirate Party Platform

Globally, the Pirate Party takes as a central tenet that intellectual property rights must be reformed. They also recognize that government transparency must be addressed, as well as issues of digital privacy (Pirate Party, 2021). The Pirate Party’s challenge to property rights and the defense of freedom of information is really a broader challenge to state power. Digital piracy can be considered more broadly as a challenge to the authority of the state. Digital piracy is a key aspect in the development of a political platform that advocates a set of values grounded in collaborative culture, nonhierarchical organization, and a reliance on the network (Beyer and McKelvey 2015). This type of politics expresses itself in a philosophy that was formed together with the development of the state-evading forms of communication that perpetuate unmanageable networks. (Robinson 2009)

The Pirate Party remains firm in its view that copyright laws need a complete overhaul to respond to the internet age. They argue that new system is needed that ensures that innovators get fair remuneration for their work and one which encourages innovation and creativity in all its forms. In their current state, the Pirate Party believes that copyright laws cannot be enforced without far-reaching censorship and privacy violations. This system is not only unsustainable and

unenforceable, they argue, but it also violates the fundamental principles of a free and democratic society and the rule of law (Pirate Party, 2021).

The Pirate Party considers the previously mentioned agreement between assorted copyright associations and almost all internet service providers blocking specific websites to be a dangerous form of censorship without precedent in Iceland. The procedure envisaged by the agreement effectively means that access to any number of domains can be blocked without any sort of due process. Consequently, they argue that there is a high risk of error of certain websites being inadvertently blocked, particularly because there appears to be no oversight on which sites are being blocked and on what grounds. Even so, the Pirate Party maintains that these methods will not work either, since configuring an alternative DNS server will circumvent the attempted censorship. (Pirate Party, 2021)

### 5. Electoral “Success” of the Pirate Party in Iceland Prior to 2016

The Pirate Party (Icelandic: Píratar) has been an active political party in Iceland since 2012. The party was founded by MP Birgitta Jónsdóttir, previously a member of The Movement, and several prominent Internet activists, including Smári McCarthy. They successfully applied for the ballot list letter P in order to run in the 2013 Icelandic parliamentary election. This marks their first electoral participation as well as the first party to request the letter P. The party managed to win three seats in the 2013 election and became the first pirate party in the world to enter a national parliament. (Reuters, 2016)

The Icelandic Pirate Party elected one city council member after the latest municipal elections, which took place in the May 2014. As noted above, the more surprising result occurred during the late spring of 2015, when the Pirate Party was shown to be the most popular party in Iceland, with a 23.9 percent share of vote preference, compared to the 12.8 percent share they had the previous month, according to a poll by Icelandic market research company MMR. Another poll, conducted by *Fréttablaðið* Iceland’s largest newspaper, showed the Píratar would be the second largest party. The prediction was that Pirate Party and the Independent Party would each get 16 members of Parliament, according to many polls (The Independent, 2015)

### 6. The 2016 Election

Across the nation the Pirate Party ran 126 candidates across the nation, and had 10 members elected to parliament. In total, the party came in third among the 12 parties who contested the election, and received 27,449 votes, or 14.5 percent of the total. For comparison, the Independence Party (Sjálfstæðisflokkur), the plurality winner of the election, received 29 percent of the vote and 21 seats in parliament, and the Left-Green Movement (Vinstri hreyfingin – grænt framboð) received 15.9 percent of the vote and 10 seats. The top two parties had, generally, an equal percentage of support in the more urban Reykjavik region and in the rest of the nation. However, the Pirate Party did significantly better in the urban area than outside the capital capturing 16.4 percent of the vote in the urban region and only 11.4 percent in the other three constituencies, winning 7 of its 10 seats in the Reykjavik region. (*Iceland Monitor*, 2016c)

Without individual level data, it is impossible to know what caused the increased level of support for the Pirate Party. However, as the Pirate Party increased its electoral viability, both the Social Democratic Alliance (Sjálfstæðisflokkur) and the Progressive Party (Framsóknarflokkur) experienced significant losses. For the Social Democratic Alliance, support fell from approximately 30 percent of the vote in 2009, to about 13 percent in 2013, and a little more than five percent in 2016. Created in 1999 as a merger of four smaller left-wing parties, the Social Democratic Party dominated the post-financial crisis election in 2009 with a pro-European, center-left platform. Additionally, the agrarian focused center-right Progressive Party went from about 25 percent in 2013 to about 11 percent in 2016. (*Iceland Monitor*, 2016)

### 7. Who Votes for the Pirate Party?

The first available survey of Pirate Party supporters was a 2012 German study, carried out by Brähler and Decker, and analyzed by Wardenger (2015). This study examined all political parties, including for the first time the Pirate Party of Germany. The study found that a Pirate Party voter is generally not wealthy -- 10.8% of Pirate voters have a low household income of less than 1000 Euros monthly, more than the followers of any other party. Only 30% of Pirate voters have a high monthly income of 2500 Euros or more.

Also, many Pirate voters are highly educated. Almost a third of them have gained *Abitur*, the highest diploma of German secondary education. This level of educational achievement is higher than for the followers of almost all other German parties, with only one political party having a marginally higher number. Unemployed people are less likely to vote for the Pirates than for most of the other parties. When it comes to fear of becoming unemployed, however, Pirate voters rank the highest. One might speculate that the relatively low-paid jobs they have are usually insecure or temporary jobs. Not surprisingly, the average age of the Pirate Party voter is the youngest across the board, and almost 10 years less than that of the next youngest group of party supporters. Challenging the stereotype that Pirates are predominantly male is the fact that the voter base is split almost equally between men and women. (Wardenger, 2015)

When looking for differences in voting behavior between urban and rural areas, the researchers found little difference

for voters of the Pirate Party in Germany, unlike the Icelandic experience. There is, however, a marked difference when considering the vote of Germans with foreign heritage. The German Pirate Party gets more than three additional percentage points, when only considering the voting preferences of this group. A possible reason for this could be that the Pirate Party's grass-roots democratic approach and nondiscriminatory rights of participation may be attractive for groups who generally have a difficult time entering the traditional political parties. Pirate Party voters also have the *most* contact with immigrants in their daily lives. Only 6.5% said that they did not have any immigrants among their peer groups, either family, friends, acquaintances, neighbors or in the workplace. (Wardenger, 2015)

Pirate Party voters tend to be unaffiliated with any religion (33%), slightly more so than followers of most other parties. Still, more than 65% said that they are either Catholic or Protestant. The reverse numbers show the same picture: non-denominational voters are more likely to vote for the Pirate party than those identifying as Catholic or Protestant. Regarding subjective health issues, the researchers found out that the Pirate Party voters have the highest level of the estimate of their personal health. They are also the voter group with the lowest tendency to feel depressed. (Wardenger, 2015).

The study also asked about media usage. Here, followers of the Pirates match their stereotype quite well. They have a slightly lower usage of classical media, such as printed press, radio, and television, than all other voter groups. In turn, they have a much higher usage of new media than the others, and come out above all the others on general online usage (gaming excluded), with an even clearer margin. (Wardenga, 2012).

### 8. Public Opinion and Ideological Placement of the Piratar Party

Although no Icelandic data is as detailed as the German study cited above, recent surveys from the Icelandic National Election Study do provide some individual-level data that shed light on public opinion on the Piratar Party and its perceived ideology. The results are presented in Tables 1 & 2 below. In general, the survey respondents tended to have a neutral assessment of the Pirate Party, with a skew to the dislike end of the spectrum, which increases over the years, as shown in Table 1. The earlier surveys (2013 and 2016) show a high number of respondents who had not heard of this party, but in 2017, this number decreases. Regarding left-right placement, again the modal category is a placement of the party in the center of the political spectrum, with a slight increase toward a leftist placement over time, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Opinion on Piratar Party, 2013-17\*

		2013	%	2016	%	2017	%
Strongly Dislike	0	170	14.4	223	19.1	379	20.1
	1	67	5.7	77	6.6	135	7.2
	2	108	9.2	118	10.	170	9.0
	3	120	10.2	107	9.2	186	9.9
	4	139	11.8	102	8.7	177	9.4
	5	215	18.2	170	14.6	273	14.5
	6	137	11.6	115	9.9	181	9.6
	7	125	10.6	96	8.2	195	10.3
	8	66	5.6	106	9.1	132	7.0
	9	14	1.2	32	2.7	37	2.0
Strongly Like	10	19	1.6	20	1.7	22	1.2
# of Respondents		1180		1166		1887	
Mean Score		4.1		3.9		3.8	

Source: Icelandic National Election Study – 2013, 2016, 2017

\*See exact wording of question in Appendix.

Table 2. Left-Right Placement of Piratar Party, 2013-17

		2013	%	2016	%	2017	%
Left	0	46	5.2%	76	7.7%	133	8.2%
	1	22	2.5%	35	3.6%	79	4.9%
	2	65	7.4%	88	8.9%	172	10.6%
	3	139	15.8%	181	18.4%	283	17.5%
	4	177	20.1%	216	22.0%	382	23.6%
	5	323	36.7%	311	31.6%	450	27.8%
	6	67	7.6%	56	5.7%	78	4.8%
	7	26	3.0%	13	1.3%	22	1.4%
	8	6	0.7%	5	0.5%	8	0.5%
	9	3	0.3%	1	0.1%	2	0.1%
Right	10	5	0.6%	2	0.2%	10	0.6%
# of Respondents		879		984		1619	
Mean Score		4.1		3.7		3.6	

Source: Icelandic National Election Study – 2013, 2016, 2017

\*See exact wording of question in Appendix.

We remain uncertain as to the source of this negativity or ideological placement. Did these attitudes arise from the indications, prior to the 2016 elections, that the Piratar Party was willing to enter into a coalition government with the status quo parties? Or, due to their failure to form a coalition government when given the mandate? Despite these results, the party remains a contender in the upcoming elections during the fall of 2021, and has maintained steady minority support in the polls. Perhaps the best strategy for the Piratar party is to be an outsider, watchdog party, and remain an opposition party.

## 9. Conclusion and Further Study

Clearly, this party's successes were aided by the series of government scandals from 2015-2017 and the severe impact of the post 2008 economic downturn in Iceland, but their platform clearly had a broad appeal to many disgruntled voters. As such, the Piratar Party is part of a larger trend of anti-establishment political parties in Europe, similar to the Finns Party in Finland and the Syriza party in Greece (Southwell & Lindgren, 2016; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). In some cases, such parties are gaining mainstream recognition across Europe. They arise out of frustration with the slow economic recovery in Europe, and growing political alienation that is also occurring in the United States and elsewhere (Berezin, 2009); Southwell, 2016; Taggart, 2018). However, given the public's perception of the Pirate Party's centrist ideology, it does not appear that this party is emulating the right-wing, anti-immigration strategy of many European populist parties, such as France's National Rally or Denmark's People's Party (Southwell, 2014; Southwell & Lindgren, 2013). Our next task is to obtain more individual-level data and in-depth interviews, to probe the ebb and flow of the Pirate Party's appeal and modest electoral successes.

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## Appendix

### Question Wording

Table 1: Variable Name: The Pirate Party – Respondent's Party Sympathy

"I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. Please rate the parties on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike the party and 10 means that you strongly like the party." (Icelandic National Election Study, 20013, 2016, 2017)

Table 2: Variable Name: Left-Right Placement of Pirate Party

"In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place the political parties on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?" (Icelandic National Election Study, 20013, 2016, 2017)

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