

Article

Populism in Ireland: Sinn Féin and the Alternative to Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's Political Dominance

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Abstract

This article seeks to investigate populism in Ireland, but more specifically the populist left-leaning party Sinn Féin. Although having a checkered past, in the last decade the party has seen a surge in popularity as the alternative voting option. Up until now academic literature discussing the populist nature of Sinn Féin often struggles to define it as such, and so, using political psychology and a clear definition of populism, this article not only categorizes the party as a populist, but also discusses its history and what effect it has had (or lack thereof) on its popularity in the leadup to the last few elections. Furthermore, the article concludes by investigating why the momentum the party had as the alternative choice slowed down, and how this vacuum allowed other fringe populist parties to see greater success during the 2024 elections.

Keywords: Populism, Ireland, Sinn Féin, Irish elections

Introduction

On the periphery of Europe is the small island nation of Ireland - often overlooked due to its much larger, and arguably more internationally important neighbor, the United Kingdom (UK). Despite this overshadowing, Ireland is no less important when studying the rise of populism on the European continent. Having faced numerous issues since the 2008 economic crisis, particularly with the provision of healthcare, housing, and more recently immigration, dissatisfaction with the two historically important rival parties - Fine Gael and Finna Fail - has boosted the popularity of the populist alternatives. One such party on the left of the political spectrum is People Before Profit – Solidarity (PBP-S), contrasted by the parties Aontú and Independent Ireland on the right. However, the best-case study for the growth of populism in the lead up to the joint 2024 European Parliament and local elections is Sinn Féin - a controversial left-leaning populist party who has a long history of relevance in the Republic, but only recently has begun shaking off its connection to the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a paramilitary organization seeking Irish reunification with Northern Ireland.

Delving into the history of Sinn Féin will highlight why a generational divide exists between voters, and why the party is considered controversial. Building on this, the article will primarily focus on Sinn Féin's populist rhetoric and campaigning using political psychology to analyze how they have used emotionally provocative language to sway the electorate to vote for them. As PBP-S and Aontú failed to make any significant gains in the 2020 and 2024 elections, they will only briefly be looked at. The new Independent Ireland party, founded as of December 2023, does however require a longer investigation at the end of this article, as they managed to gain one seat in the EU Parliament elections in 2024. Finally, while independent politicians are politically relevant in Ireland, this article will focus solely on Irish political parties. Analyzing independents in depth would require a separate, dedicated piece of work.

Historical Context of Sinn Féin

It might seem odd to those outside of Ireland that to understand modern Sinn Féin one must first return to 1913 when Ireland was still a part of the UK. In this year the Irish Volunteers, a paramilitary organization of Irish nationalists and republicans, was founded in direct response to the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (Martin, 2013: 1-4). Whilst the latter sought to oppose domestic self-government on the island, the Irish Volunteers sought to secure and maintain the 'rights and liberties common to the whole people of Ireland' (Martin, 2013: 4). After a failed military coup in 1916 by rebels, who were predominantly Irish Volunteers, widespread dissatisfaction with British rule began to emerge across the island, both in the response to the British execution of the revolutionaries, but specifically to the Conscription Crisis of 1918 which sought to impose a British military draft within Ireland during the First World War (WWI) (Irish Times, 2017; Laffan, 1999: 122-168).

Sinn Féin, founded in 1905 as a conservative party advocating for a dual monarchy with the UK, saw many of its members join the Irish Volunteers during the 1916 Easter Rising, resulting in the Irish Times (1917) dubbing it the 'the Sinn Féin Rebellion.' Various

republicans across the political spectrum flocked to the party thereafter, and in 1918 Sinn Féin changed political direction - now committed to achieving an independent Irish republic (Laffan, 1999: 4). The first post-WWI (and post-Rising) election in 1918 saw Sinn Féin win a landslide victory with 46.9% of the vote on the island, whilst in the north only securing 19% of the vote (de Bromhead et al., 2020: 890). In 1919, the independent Irish state sought by the rebels of 1916, became a step closer to reality with the formation of the elected Irish assembly named the *Dáil Éireann* (Farrell, 1971).

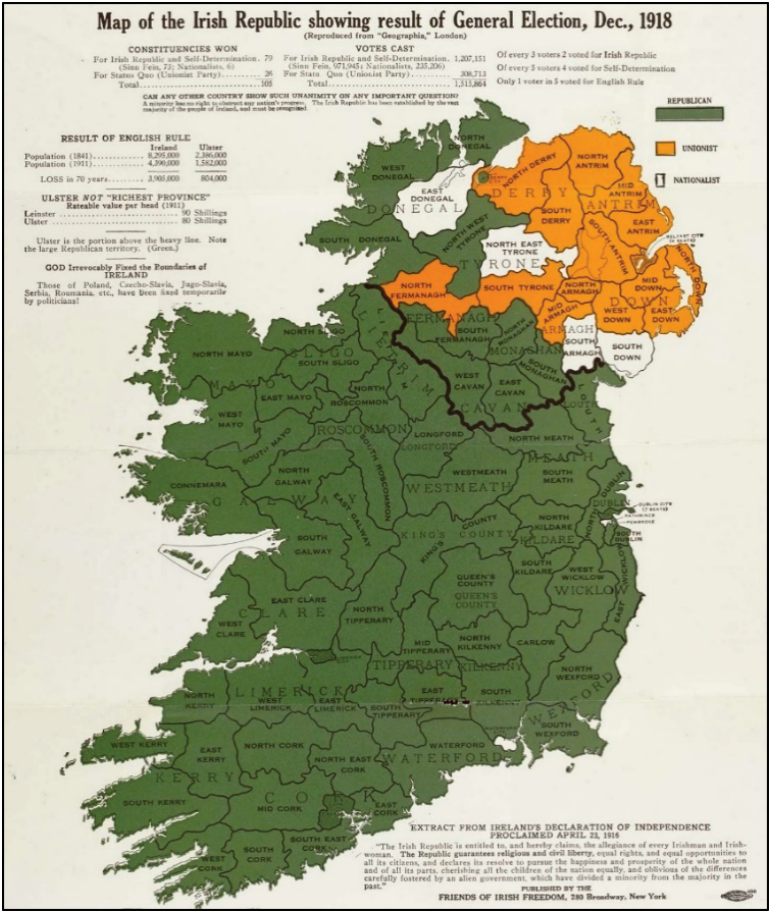


Figure 1: A 1918 electoral map of Ireland. Green are Sinn Féin seats, orange are Unionist seats and white represents the Irish Party (RTÉ, 2015).

Following the brutal Irish War of Independence, peace negotiations between the members of the Dáil and the British government concluded in 1921 with a treaty that saw the partition of the island between the republican south and the unionist north, the latter of whom was to remain within the UK (Saorstát Éireann, 1922). Amongst other terms, Ireland would also remain within the British Commonwealth under a Dominion status, similar to that of Canada, and required members of the Dáil to swear an oath of allegiance to the British monarch. Both Sinn Féin and its military wing, the IRA, was split on whether or not to accept the treaty. More hardline elements argued that the fight should

continue until the entire island was free from British rule and recognized as a free and independent republican nation. However, a narrow vote of 64 votes to 57 saw the treaty ratified in the Dáil, resulting in a nearly yearlong bloody civil war between the pro-treaty IRA (reorganized as the ‘Defense Forces’) and the anti-treaty IRA. Sinn Féin had been marred by the civil war as anti-treaty politicians abstained from partaking in the Dáil, whilst pro-treaty politicians founded the new political party Cumann na nGaedheal (which would later merge with two other organizations in 1933 to form Fine Gael). Sinn Féin disintegrated thereafter, losing all relevance once its anti-treaty leader, Éamon de Valera, left the party to found Fianna Fáil – primarily abandoning their abstentionist stance towards the Dáil (Laffan, 1999: 441).

A surprise victory by Fianna Fáil in 1932 put the remaining IRA on the backfoot, as initially Fianna Fáil legalized the organization and freed all the post-civil war prisoners, but ultimately refused to dispute the partitioned north and failed to declare a republican Ireland (Coogan, 2008: 29). De Valera criminalized the IRA once again in 1936 following high profile murders, but at this stage the organization was a shadow of its former self (Laffan, 1999: 448). During the 1930’s the more left-leaning IRA had founded their own rival organization, the Republican Congress, and the fascist right-wing members joined with Cumann na nGaedheal and their ‘Blueshirts’ modelled on the Italian fascist paramilitary militia nicknamed the ‘Blackshirts’ (Laffan, 1999: 448). IRA numbers decreased even more significantly when a large majority of its republic seeking members left the organization once Fianna Fáil introduced a republican constitution in 1937, abolishing the Oath of Allegiance to the British monarchy, introducing an elected president as head of state, and making a territorial claim to Northern Ireland (Constitution of Ireland, 1937).

Although the remaining members of the IRA were unified by the goal of ending the partition in Northern Ireland, they were on the fringes of both the left- and right-wings of the political spectrum. As is evident by members leaving to form their own political parties in the previous decade, in the aftermath of the Second World War the IRA was struggling to maintain its numbers and believed political organization was necessary to rebuild. Its leadership voted and passed the resolution instructing IRA members to join the irrelevant Sinn Féin party, and repurpose it as the political party of the IRA (Maillot, 2015: 128). With such a wide range of political beliefs amongst its remaining members, the party’s nearly sole political priority was that of reunification. Thereafter, the IRA began conducting armed operations in Northern Ireland, initially receiving political support from the south which most evident in the election of four new Sinn Féin TDs to the Dáil in 1957 (Maillot, 2015: 10).

This militaristic momentum was ultimately lost by the 1961 election with the introduction of internment without trial, both in Northern Ireland and the Republic. The failed military campaign was called off and the IRA became dominated by new, younger, left-leaning members, which cumulated in the election of the Marxist Cathal Goulding as Chief of Staff. These left-wing members split from Sinn Féin to establish the Worker’s Party following disagreements over how to frame the struggle for unification in Northern Ireland. The more traditional Northern ‘Provisional IRA’ sought to frame the conflict through a nationalist and religious lens, as Catholic Irish against Protestant British, whilst

the socialist/communist ‘Official IRA’ of the Republic sought to frame it through class warfare, and believed unification could be solved through political means (Gregory, 2010; Maillot, 2015: 169). The Provisionals would continue in the same year to conduct a thirty-year armed campaign against what they described as a British occupation of Northern Ireland, today known as ‘the Troubles.’ The conflict only officially ended in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, claiming the lives of roughly 3,532 individuals, with the IRA being responsible for more than half this number (CAIN, n.d.).

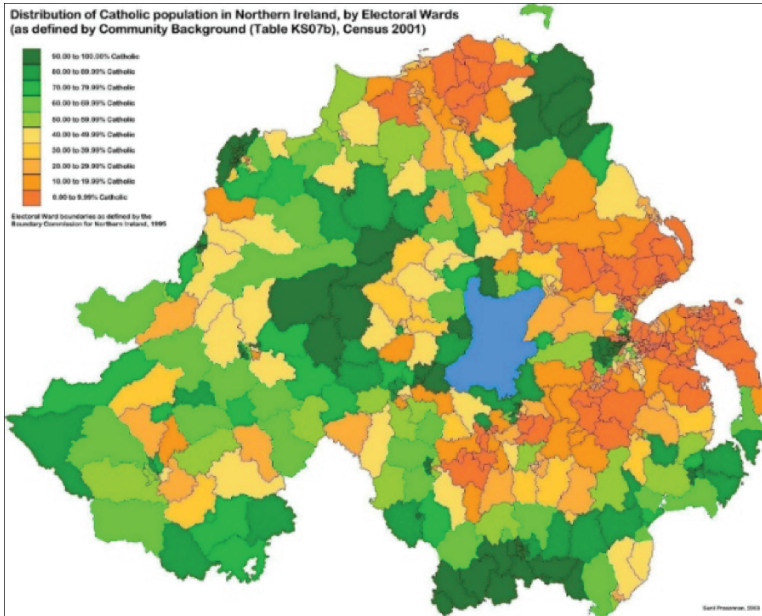


Figure 2: *Distribution of Catholics, at ward level, across Northern Ireland in 2001.* (Prasannan S., 2003)

Methodology

Defining ‘populism’ is often a difficult endeavor. For this article the widely accepted ‘the people’ vs ‘the elite’ narrative used by populist parties will be the primary qualifier to defining a party as populist. This theory argues that populists present “‘the people’ as a morally good force and contrasts them against ‘the elite,’ who are portrayed as corrupt and self-serving” (ECPS, n.d.). Investigating how modern Sinn Féin use this type of language against their rivals, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, will therefore be paramount in establishing them as one such populist party. But what type of language can be considered populist, especially when one man’s populist can be another man’s regular definition of a politician? In this case, the use of emotionally charged language will be used as the basis for investigation, primarily built on the ideas of political psychology that study the affect that emotions have of political mobilization (Aytac et al., 2024). Guillem Rico, Marc Guinjoan and Eva Anduiza’s article of how anger is mobilized will be the baseline for judging whether or not a statement or claim is populist (Rico et al., 2017). In their words: “Anger is linked to the perception that a frustrating event is certain, externally caused, and unfair... chiefly, the external attribution of blame and its fierce

moral and confrontational outlook” (Rico et al., 2017: 445).

Using this foundation, we can deduce that Sinn Féin’s populist messaging revolves around being anti-establishment and anti-corporate, most evident in blaming the previous Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil governments for Ireland’s political issues by being ‘ beholden to corporate interests’ (Sinn Féin, 2019). This article will only consider discourse that explicitly highlights an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ narrative as populist, meaning that which does not only state something a former government did, but actively generalizes and paints the opposition as the enemy in some manner. The following example highlights what this means: *“In addition, the maintenance grant was cut and restricted under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments during the economic downturn and no sufficient attempts have been made by either party to restore them. Our third-level education system is simply not accessible to all. It is becoming less accessible to many on the basis of financial means”* (Sinn Féin, 2020: 36).

In this paragraph arguing for free education in Sinn Féin’s 2020 manifesto, it is clearly stated that the party believes that previous governments are at fault for making education less accessible. However, while some may consider there to be populist undertones to this paragraph, there is no explicit discourse used that can be considered as emotionally charged. Compared to this paragraph from the same manifesto: *“Without a government policy that is framed by climate justice and a just transition, the leadership and direction of climate action will become the plaything of bankers and corporate investors. They will be concerned with only one thing, how to make a buck out of the crisis. That is what they do, and it is killing the planet”* (Sinn Féin, 2020: 25).

We can clearly see that it uses a strong anti-establishment and anti-corporate message to evoke an emotional response by broadly claiming corporations only wish to make money from crises. This supports the previous definition of ‘anger’ which includes ‘moral evaluations constitut[ing] a key component of the populist belief system’ (Rico et al., 2017: 449). To this end, an appendix will be included at the end of this article to show which pieces of texts were considered to be populist. Some researchers may argue that Sinn Féin’s manifestos and campaigns contain more (or less) populist language, but the key issue is that it is present in the first place—and, as will be shown, to a much greater extent than in the other two mainstream political parties in Ireland.

When investigating the demographic details of supporters for populist parties, exit polls often provide the best answer. Yet, to support this information, this article will also delve into the opinion pieces written by party supporters as they often give a more personal and grounded view on what issues they find pressing, and why they urge other voters to vote the same way. This is yet another attempt to gauge the emotions that populist parties tap into during their campaigns. Readers must be made aware that Ireland has a unique system of voting which is termed the ‘single transferable vote’ (STV), which is even used for the European Parliamentary elections. In summary, this voting system allows individuals to rank politicians on the ballot and, in theory, seeks to ensure that the electorate has at least some representation in government (Electoral Reform Society, n.d.).

STV most often results in coalition governments, sometimes even excluding the party with the most votes if they fail to form a coalition with the various other parties and independent politicians elected to parliament. An extreme example of this was the first Irish inter-party government following the 1948 general election which saw a grand coalition of five different political parties, and independent politicians, all led by Fine Gael to keep de Valera and his Fianna Fáil party out (McCullagh, 1998). Here, Fianna Fáil was six seats short of a majority, and up to then had been winning successive elections since 1932. For this reason, the popular vote is often gauged by the first preference of voters, not by the coalition government that claims majority in the Dáil.

The Popular Populist Leftist Party

Sinn Féin's populist anti-establishment and anti-corporate messaging is clearly seen in the party's manifestos. Particularly looking at when Mary Lou McDonald took over the party, there are blatant examples such as in the 2019 EU election manifesto: *"EU banking policy, which is driven by unelected officials, favors banks and corporate elites at the expense of ordinary people;"* the 2020 general election manifesto: *"Without public broadcasting, we will be left with billionaire media moguls pushing their own agenda, drawing up blacklists of journalists and stifling debate and investigation of economic and political power;"* and the 2024 EU election manifesto: *"There are two competing visions for the future of the European Union. One is of an EU that continues to enlarge, becomes more centralized and bureaucratic, more militarized, lacks transparency, is under undue influence from corporate interests and lobbyists, and seeks to take ever more powers from Member States. Sinn Féin's vision, in contrast, is for a European Union that works better for the people of Europe, that focuses on common challenges which we are best dealing with collectively – the cost-of-living crisis, food security, regional development, and climate change."*

Counting the number of times, we see the clear use of emotionally provocative and 'us' vs 'them' language being used, 10 instances can be found in their 16 paged 2019 EU Parliament election manifesto, 19 instances in their 110 paged 2020 general election manifesto, and three instances in their 27 paged 2024 EU Parliament election manifesto (See Appendix). Comparatively, there was no similar language used in both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's manifestos from the same time (See Manifesto section in the bibliography for sources).

Manifestos only provide one avenue of investigation, their annual Ard Fheis, or annual party conference, is rife with emotionally charged discourse that portray Sinn Féin as the best party for the people to fight back against a corrupt elitist government. Take this example from McDonald's speech in 2021: *"I know you have had it with governments giving tax breaks to millionaire executives while homeless children eat dinner off cardboard on the street. Governments for the developers and bankers, for the cozy club and the insiders. It's time now for a government for you and your family"* (McDonald, 2021). Similarly, in 2023: *"We ask for our chance. The others have had theirs. The longer they remain in power the worse things get. I'm asking you to back Sinn Féin. To back change and the future that you and your family deserve"* (McDonald, 2023)

Such discourse builds into the larger political campaign that seeks to win votes by tapping into the ‘angry vote,’ the vote that seeks to disrupt the status quo, or as one voter puts it: “to send a message to the establishment” (Frayer, 2024). The younger generation played a key role in Sinn Féin’s strategy, which naturally involved leveraging social media to boost their popularity. Through various platforms, they were able to sustain the narrative that they represented the best chance for real change:



Figure 3: Screenshot example of Sinn Féin’s populist rhetoric in Facebook posts (Sinn Féin, 2024).

Sinn Féin in a Post-Troubles Ireland

Clearly meeting the definition of populism, Sinn Féin’s use of emotionally provocative language attracts angry voters. However, the party is still affected by its historic links to the IRA. For instance, during his 2017 trial over his involvement in the killing of David Byrne a year earlier, Sinn Féin Teachta Dála (TD) Jonathan Dowdall was found guilty of membership in the IRA (BBC, 2017). Sinn Féin had already begun distancing itself from Dowdall after his resignation from the party in 2014—a move he attributed to bullying but could be seen as the party proactively managing the issue (Fegan, 2015).

On February 10, 2018, in a further attempt to shake off its bloody past, Mary Lou McDonald succeeded the controversial Gerry Adams, an individual who may have been a leading member of the IRA, despite his continuous denial of these allegations (O’Neill, 2019). McDonald differs from other leading members of Sinn Féin as she is a career politician with seemingly no ties to the paramilitary organization and was once part of Fianna Fáil but left the party due to policy differences and a strong support for Irish Unity – the latter issue of which she seemed to be undecided about during Brexit (McCormack, 2020). More recently, during a televised national RTÉ’s Prime Time leaders’ debate a month before the 2020 election, McDonald was confronted with a question regarding a murder investigation that the victim’s family strongly claims was perpetrated by the IRA (BBC, 2020b). In the same election, after finding out he had been elected to the Dáil, Sinn Féin’s David Cullinane celebrated by ending his speech with: “Up the Republic, Up the ‘Ra. Tiocfaidh ár Lá” – the latter translating to ‘our day will come,’ a popular IRA slogan, alongside the show of support to the IRA that “Up the ‘Ra” displays (McGee & Leahy, 2020).

Since the Good Friday Agreement and their decision to end its support for the IRA's armed struggle, Sinn Féin's popularity has been steadily increasing (Adams, 1996). Within the national elections Sinn Féin obtained 2.55% of the vote in 1997, 6.5% in 2002, 6.94% in 2007, 9.94% in 2011, and 13.85% in 2016. The targeting of 'those left behind' has been the cornerstone of their campaigning in the post-2008 political climate, as affordable housing and accessible healthcare became the pressing issues over the last decade (Brennan, 2023).

Despite lingering links to the IRA, modern support for Sinn Féin comes from three primary sources. Staunch grassroots supporters of the party still have the primary goal of a united Ireland, dissatisfied that Northern Ireland is still part of the UK. The Irish Times investigated how these supporters viewed the change of leadership in 2018, and found they were excited by the prospect of McDonald offering a fresh new perspective, as long as policy remained the same – "...Irish unity, reconciliation, a shared republic, a big change in social conditions" (McGee, 2018). In an election exit poll conducted by The Irish Times, RTÉ, TG4 and University College Dublin after the 2020 general election, it was found that new Sinn Féin voters were predominantly younger, aged between 18-35, showing the effectiveness of Sinn Féin's described strategy of 'playing down the paramilitary legacy but without irking the republican base' (Boyce, 2024; Collins, 2020). This could explain how the party can draw younger generations to vote for the party, as they do not have the same connection to 'the Troubles' that older generation might have, whilst retaining their ultimate goal of reunification. Polls and opinion pieces highlight that younger people feel let down by the continued dominance of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in Irish politics – with housing and cost of living being the dominant pressing issues for this generation (IPSOS, B&A & The Irish Times, 2024; Haverty, 2022; Irish Times, 2022; Taylor, 2024). Finally, 'those left behind' also includes the working class that support the party's leftist policies and have been one of the long-time supporters of Sinn Féin. The Think Ireland 2024 election poll provides concrete evidence of this as 61% of Sinn Féin voters described themselves as working class – the second highest group of working-class voters, right behind the 'other right' voters (Cunningham, 2024).

Sinn Féin During the Irish 2020 General Elections – The Time for Change?

In the lead up to the Irish general election of 2020 the fallout from Brexit had been one of the dominant political situations, but surprisingly it had very little impact on the campaign trail (Murphy, 2021). Instead, domestic issues—namely housing and healthcare—were the primary focus for all Irish parties. In healthcare, waiting times for appointments and admittance to inpatient hospital beds were at an all-time high, having increased year by year since 2016 (Department of Health, 2019). Housing is an issue resulting from rising rent and house prices. In 2020 the Irish Times explained: "*Since 2012, house and apartment prices in Dublin have risen by 90 percent and 80 percent respectively (a little less in the country at large), while wages have increased by only 18 percent*" (McWilliams & Taylor, 2020). Too few new housing builds, high prices for lower-priced apartments, all compound this issue (Tedin & Faubert, 2020).

The Irish general election of 2020 took place on February 8, roughly a month before the country-wide Covid-19 lockdown (Carroll, 2020). In a surprising turn, Sinn Féin

received 24.5% of first preference votes, more than Fianna Fáil (22.2%) and Fine Gael (20.9%), and was set to form a majority coalition government if they could find allies to do so (Robertson, 2020). Ultimately Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, together having 72 of the 81-seat required for majority, formed a coalition alongside the Green Party. This kept Sinn Féin from governing, much to the party's outrage and protests (BBC, 2020a). But why did Sinn Féin surge in popularity in this particular election?

The tipping point came from young people, especially those in the 18-35 year demographic that voted primarily with the housing issue in mind (Collins, 2020; Ní Aodha, 2020). This, coupled with dissatisfaction with how Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil had been running the country since the financial crisis, offered Sinn Féin an opportunity as the alternative vote. One analysis indicates that in the leadup to the election, the decision of RTÉ to initially exclude Sinn Féin in the televised Leader's Debate, coupled with the refusal of the other two parties to form a coalition with Sinn Féin in case they gained enough votes, help to form a self-fulfilling prophecy that Sinn Féin was being excluded by the 'old boys club' of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael' (BBC, 2020b; Brennan & McConnell, 2020). The issues, the generational shift, coupled with the traditional left-leaning voting base of Sinn Féin, all paved the way for the party to receive the most first preferential votes in the election. The question now was whether they could keep this momentum going into the 2024 EU Parliament and local elections.

Sinn Féin and Europe Before 2024

Sinn Féin's stance towards European integration started in 1967 with deep distrust - believing that Ireland should align itself with 'the third world' rather than the "inward-looking, protected, monopoly dominated group of rich industrial countries." They also believed: *"If Ireland joined the [common market] with Britain we would thus have to recognize the territorial frontiers of the United Kingdom. Yet the Constitution lays claim to part of the territorial area of the UK. Is the Dublin Government willing to abandon also its claim for a politically united Ireland?"* (Irish Left Archive, 2011).

By the 2004 European Parliament elections Sinn Féin had softened their approach to a 'Eurocritical, not Eurosceptic' stance. They supported EU expansion, but ensured voters knew the party stood 'for change in the EU,' placing emphasis on nation's rights to self-determination and promising to 'argue our case for a United Ireland and for an end to all military occupation in the EU' (Sinn Féin, 2004). They also highlight: *"Critical engagement is not an anti-European approach. Indeed, Irish republicanism has its origins in a broader European democratic movement. Today Sinn Féin continues to build cooperative links with like-minded democratic movements throughout Europe and beyond."*

The 2024 election continues this trend, but by now Ireland is firmly committed to the EU, a fact Sinn Féin realizes in a post-Brexit landscape: *"It is time for the EU to focus on what matters to workers and families: the cost-of-living crisis, improving wages and conditions, regional development, and economic development. It's time for the EU to play its part in advocating for and planning for Irish unity"* (Sinn Féin, 2024). It should be no surprise that the second item mentioned in the manifesto is 'Standing up for Irish

Unity’ and a call for the ‘EU institutions to become advocates for Irish reunification, consistent with their position on Cyprus.’

Sinn Féin can be seen using populist language once again in their manifesto for the joint 2024 European Parliament and local elections, but this time to a lesser extent than previous elections. Of the three instances of populist language being used to aggravate voters, all three have a stark anti-corporate, anti-elitist message (Sinn Féin, 2024). The media campaign online mirrors this:

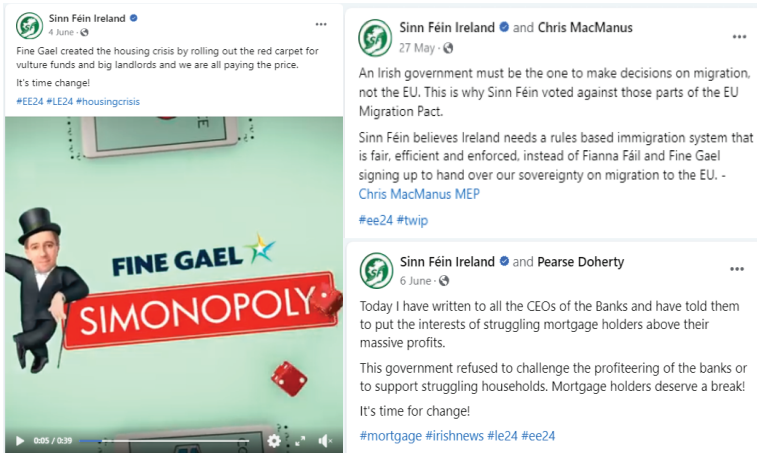


Figure 4: Examples of Sinn Féin's populist rhetoric in the leadup to the elections (Sinn Féin, 2024).

One video posted by Sinn Féin explicitly states that Fine Gael, Fianna Fail, and the Green Party are ‘the party of homelessness, the party of rising house prices, rising rents, the party of institutional investors and vulture funds,’ and Sinn Féin is the one to ‘deliver tens of thousands of genuinely affordable homes’ if you vote for them (Sinn Féin, 2024).

Sinn Féin During the Joint 2024 EU Parliamentary Elections and Local Elections – Steady as She Goes?

In the lead-up to the 2024 election, Ireland’s national public service broadcaster, RTÉ, highlighted that the key issues facing Ireland in 2024 are health, housing, migration, cost of living, the economy, and climate change (Cunningham, 2023). Sinn Féin’s 2024 European Parliament manifesto continues to address these challenges while also highlighting other issues considered important to Ireland at the European level, including Irish neutrality, Ireland's stance on the Israel–Hamas conflict and the Ukraine war, human and workers' rights, migration, and the environment (Sinn Féin, 2024). During the same election, voters would be asked to vote in the local elections, which would see individuals elected to local government positions across the country. Unlike the 2020 general elections which saw a turnout of 62.88%, the 2024 elections only had 50.65% of the population turn up to vote (European Parliament, 2024; International Foundation for Electoral Systems, n.d.). Sinn Féin managed to secure 11.8% of the first

preference votes in the local elections, compared to Fine Gael's 23%, and Fianna Fáil's 22.9%, a performance nearly echoed by the EU Parliament elections which saw the parties receive 11.8%, 29.6%, and 16.6% respectively (RTÉ, 2024). To Sinn Féin this came as a shock, with party member Matt Carthy stating during a radio interview: *"There was a sense over the last number of weeks that there was a drop coming. To be quite frank nobody saw these results"* (Halpin, 2024a). Despite the results Sinn Féin still managed to have two candidates elected to the European Parliament where they opted to join The Left in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL Group with other leftist European populist parties such as the Italian Five Star Movement and France's *La France Insoumise* (European Parliament, 2024).

Commentators point to one leading cause of Sinn Féin's less-than-stellar performance: immigration (O'Doherty, 2024; Pogatchnik, 2024). On November 24, 2023, three children and one woman were injured in a knife attack outside a Dublin school (Kwai & Satariano, 2023). Although Irish news outlets did not identify the man, rumors quickly spread online that he was an Algerian immigrant, escalating into a call to action that resulted in "tens of millions of euro worth of criminal damage" following an anti-immigration riot (Foy, 2023; Lally et al., 2023). Subsequently, there was the ongoing removal of "tent cities," where migrants had gathered in tents due to the ongoing housing crisis and the government's inability to find accommodation for the 1,780 unhoused migrant men as of May 14 (Figure 4) (Ehl, 2024). Taoiseach Simon Harris of Fine Gael supported these removals, stating: "We do not live in a country where makeshift shantytowns are allowed to just develop" (Halpin, 2024a). Reportedly, Sinn Féin failed to "reflect the concerns of ordinary people on immigration," with reports suggesting that McDonald warned party members not to post anything contrary to her immigration stance, which remained unclear for a long time (Halpin, 2024b). Immigration became one of the key issues leading up to the 2024 elections, exacerbated by the housing crisis and the UK's hardline immigration stance, which saw 80% of new applicants crossing the border from Northern Ireland (Finnegan & Conlon, 2024). UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak claimed this was due to the successful deterrent effect of his Rwanda deportation plan.



Figure 5: Asylum seekers' tents near the International Protection Office and Refugee Legal Service on Lower Mount Street, Dublin, Ireland, on July 7, 2023. Photo: Derick P. Hudson.

However, this is not the only reason support for Sinn Féin has declined. Since the 2020 election, Sinn Féin has flip-flopped on many of its policy positions, losing "angry" supporters as a result of the decisions they made. Beginning with the coalition talks post-election, Sinn Féin alienated many grassroots voters by considering the possibility of forming a government with either Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil (Allen, 2023). This, combined with increased interaction with businesses, has led many to comment that their policies have been drifting economically more toward the center, thereby alienating their traditional left-leaning supporters (Brennan, 2023; Weckler, 2022). The party's focus on the "wrong" social issues has also been problematic. They supported the "Family" and "Care" referendums, which aimed to modernize two articles within the constitution (39th and 40th) to be more vague about what constitutes a family unit and to remove a reference to a woman's role within the home (University College Dublin, 2024). Before the referendum, Sinn Féin vowed to re-run them should they fail, but they did not anticipate that both acts would be resoundingly rejected, with 67% and 74% of voters casting a "No" vote on the amendments, respectively (O'Connell, 2024).

Adding to this, despite accusing "billionaire media moguls of pushing their own agenda, drawing up blacklists of journalists, and stifling debate and investigation of economic and political power," Sinn Féin has pursued a campaign of silencing critics, including *The Irish Times* and its political correspondent, Harry McGee, as well as the national broadcaster RTÉ (The Journal, 2023). The international community responded directly, with several journalist organizations and academics signing a joint letter to Sinn Féin and McDonald expressing their concerns about censorship (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Additionally, Sinn Féin overestimated its success in the 2024 elections and fielded too many candidates, causing a split in the vote (McClafferty, 2024). These issues combined led supporters to turn to other populist options, namely PBP-Solidarity, Aontú, and Independent Ireland.

The Alternative to the Alternative Vote

Immigration has become the word du jour and many voters during the 2024 election that would have voted for Sinn Féin decided to turn to parties who are unapologetic in their hardline stance against immigration. Self-described as 'a "comfortable alternative" to Sinn Féin,' Independent Ireland was founded to focus on rural voters, but quickly became the right-wing populist party that attracted anti-immigration voters alongside Aontú (Ryan, 2023). The populism in both party's stances on migration is clear: Independent Ireland states "*We will secure Ireland's borders by enforcing our immigration laws and end profiteering by vested interests at the expense of the Irish taxpayer*" (Independent Ireland, n.d.); Whereas Aontú, 'The Only Party Listening To The People,' wish to solve the issue by tackling the various other crises facing Ireland, compensating communities where asylum seekers are moved into, and enforce stronger border control policies that will include more deportations (Aontú, n.d.).

Of the three alternative populist parties, only a candidate from Independent Ireland was elected to the EU Parliament, but divisions and criticisms quickly started to appear as MEP Ciaran Mullooly opted to join the liberal Renew Europe group (Independent Ireland, 2024). On a local level Independent Ireland preformed the best, gaining 2.8% of

Whether or not Sinn Féin will experience a resurgence in next year’s general election remains uncertain. Their historical connection to the IRA is now nearly irrelevant to most younger voters, and it appears that any news of Sinn Féin’s ties to the paramilitary organization primarily affects older voters who have a living connection to the violence. This generational divide is evident in a letter exchange between *Irish Times* readers discussing younger voters’ preference for Sinn Féin (Irish Times, 2022).

As for the other populist parties in the nation, while politically irrelevant and on the fringes for now, they stand to gain the most from Sinn Féin’s loss. Independent Ireland’s Ciaran Mullooly’s decision to join a pro-European parliament group despite the party’s Eurosceptic stance has raised the eyebrows of many, which might negatively affect the party’s ability to win over disgruntled voters in the next election. PBP-S continually fails to make any headway during elections, although left-leaning working-class voters may cast their lot in with PBP-S should they decide to stop supporting Sinn Féin. Most of all, Aontú stands to gain the most, offering disgruntled voters a new alternative to the alternative Sinn Féin, and attracting working class voters away from Independent Ireland, particularly given that The Think Ireland 2024 election poll suggests that this group predominantly support ‘other right’ parties (Cunningham, 2024).

However, Sinn Féin shouldn’t be counted out just yet, as they currently hold the majority in the Northern Irish Assembly—an unprecedented result that may drive further election promises in the Republic advocating for reunification (Pogatchnik, 2024). If Sinn Féin successfully refines its policies and regains public support, it could have a chance at making gains in the upcoming general election, reversing its currently declining popularity in polls, which now place them behind Fine Gael for the first time since September 2021 (REDC & Business Post, 2024). That said, Fine Gael’s response to immigration could explain their rise in the polls, a trend that might continue into the next election if the momentum persists (Clarke, 2024). While predicting the results of the next election may be futile, it is certainly one to watch closely.

Appendix: Populist Language Used in Sinn Féin’s Manifestos
2019 European Parliament Election Manifesto

Quote	Page
“Our MEPs now need to continue that fight – for communities, for ordinary working people and families.”	4
“In contrast, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael belong to the Right-wing EPP and ALDE groups which want to create a Superstate centralizing power in Europe far away from ordinary people. These groups are also determined to create an EU army with more military spending rather than investing to tackle the cost of living and provide quality public services. They are advocates of austerity and beholden to corporate interests.”	5
“Sinn Féin reject increased militarization and related spending and will fight for ordinary people.”	5
“It is only by voting for Sinn Féin that you will get credible and effective MEPs who will fight for ordinary Irish people’s interests in Europe, challenge vested interests and insiders and work for a radically and progressively reformed European Union.”	5

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“It is only by voting for Sinn Féin that you will get credible and effective MEPs who will fight for ordinary Irish people’s interests in Europe, challenge vested interests and insiders and work for a radically and progressively reformed European Union.”	5
“EU banking policy, which is driven by unelected officials, favors banks and corporate elites at the expense of ordinary people.”	7
“The ECB’s quantitative easing programme is pumping billions into the banks to the benefit of corporations and major polluters.”	7
“Sinn Féin is opposed to PESCO and to Irish money being used to fund companies who are exporting arms and fueling conflicts around the world.”	10
“We call for a State Aid exemption for rural areas in light of Brexit and urge the reduction of bureaucracy so that a greater portion of EU funding for things like broadband actually reaches the intended beneficiaries instead of being pocketed by middlemen.”	10
“Local fisheries are suffering while profit-driven super-trawlers controlled by multi-nationals devastate our environment, fish stocks and coastal communities.”	11
“Sinn Féin MEPs oppose the Commission’s proposal to invest in militarization by plundering Regional Development Funding.”	11

2020 General Election Manifesto

Quote	Page
“In that time, we have had Governments for the wealthy, Governments for the privileged, Governments for the property developers, Governments for the banks. Sinn Féin believes that it’s time that we had a government for the people.”	3
“Successive governments have delivered for their friends and cronies. They have delivered for big business, for vested interests and for golden circles. In Government, Sinn Féin will deliver for the people.”	4
“Sinn Féin wants to be in Government to deliver for ordinary, working people. But we don’t want to be part of the system. We want to change the system.”	4
“Sinn Féin will take on the cartel-like beef processing sector that is pushing family farms out of business, reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) so that it supports the farmers who need it the most and ensure farmers are assisted in the transition towards a greener, more sustainable agriculture sector.”	13
“Without a government policy that is framed by climate justice and a just transition, the leadership and direction of climate action will become the plaything of bankers and corporate investors. They will be concerned with only one thing - how to make a buck out of the crisis. That is what they do, and it is killing the planet.”	25

“Without public broadcasting, we will be left with billionaire media moguls pushing their own agenda, drawing up blacklists of journalists and stifling debate and investigation of economic and political power.”	30
“Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Labor are the yes men of Europe. Whatever Brussels and Frankfurt propose, they support. Their MEPs are the EU’s representatives in Ireland, promoting the agenda of the EU institutions rather than the interests of people in Ireland in the EU.”	44
“It is time to stand up for Ireland and the interests of all of the people who share this island. It is time to end the Brussels power grab, to reign in the Commission, and return powers to the member states. It is time to halt the attack on the wages and conditions of working people and to promote a basic threshold of decency for all. It is time to rebuild our public services and defend our public utilities.”	44
“Sinn Féin will build a fairer and more democratic European Union that works for the people of Europe, not for the EU insiders, middlemen and corporate interests.”	44
<p>“Sinn Féin are determined that ordinary people in working class and rural communities must be protected from criminals...</p> <p>“Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil before them have abandoned working class and rural communities to organized crime gangs. They both starved the Gardaí of the resources they need to protect communities and they both failed to tackle garda corruption. They have not taken the necessary steps to ensure consistent and appropriate sentencing by judges. They are both soft on crime.”</p>	69
“Sinn Féin in Government will demand probity and accountability from all who hold positions of power and responsibility. We will take on white collar crime and we will uphold the common good.”	71
“To make matters worse, the Fine Gael Government, supported by Fianna Fáil, have hitched their wagon to costly, risky Public Private Partnerships. This is despite the fact that we know they do not provide value for money. The Government knows this too, which is why we have no published reports on the value for money of these initiatives.”	91
“Sinn Féin in Government would not tolerate such abuse of political power, and our proposals set out to restore confidence in politics and ensure that those in power are working for the people and not for money or the vested interests of the golden circle establishment.”	96
“The public have lost confidence in the Dáil, this must be a priority focus for political reform.”	96
“For years, the insurance industry has pursued an aggressive campaign to portray sky-high premiums as the result of claims and fraud. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have served the industry by peddling their spin.”	104
“It is only a decade since the banks of this state crashed our economy. Poor regulation, an arrogant banking class, and a parasitic relationship between the banks and Government of the time created a dangerous climate for customers, taxpayers, and our democracy.”	105
“It is time the banks gave something back to the Irish people. Government must be vigilant and hold the banks to account.”	105

“Sinn Féin will challenge the arrogance and contempt for customers that persists at the core of our banking system. We do not believe that banks should exist only to increase their profits and deliver handsome dividends and bonuses for their managers. Banks should exist to support Irish society, its customers and businesses.”	105
“The effects of the economic crisis and property crash still live with us today. Our housing and property sector should have been rebuilt in the interests of citizens, renters and homeowners. Instead, Fine Gael rolled out the red carpet to vulture funds and international investors, allowing them to Hoover up assets from distressed families and buy up commercial property in our towns and cities. They have allowed these vultures and funds to transfer wealth out of Ireland to hidden international investors using low-tax arrangements.”	106

2024 European Parliament Manifesto

Quote	Page
“There are two competing visions for the future of the European Union. One is of an EU that continues to enlarge, becomes more centralized and bureaucratic, more militarized, lacks transparency, is under undue influence from corporate interests and lobbyists, and seeks to take ever more powers from Member States.”	5
“We have already seen worrying levels of de-regulation brought in with these crises used as an excuse. Lessons that had been learnt about the need for regulation of the financial sector seem to have been forgotten. Some like Fine Gael are openly pushing for further rules to help vulture funds and banks. Only Sinn Féin can be trusted to stand up to this agenda.”	13
“Focus to be placed on those large corporate interests that are responsible for the climate crisis rather than undue burdens being imposed on ordinary citizens.”	19

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