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Introduction

In the elections of 2011 Sinn Féin made something of a breakthrough in national elections. It received almost 9.9 per cent of the national vote in the general election, a three point increase on its 2007 result. Later in the year its candidate for the presidential election, Martin McGuinness, polled almost 14 per cent. The party's return in seats though less than its vote would have commanded in a purely proportional system, was a significant improvement on its disappointing result in 2007. Its 14 seats compared favourably to Fianna Fáil's 20 seats. Fianna Fáil's decision not to contest the presidential election, while probably wise in hindsight, caused some to wonder was the party leaving itself open to further encroachment of its position by Sinn Féin.

Throughout this book we see examples of small parties who blaze brightly for a short period, only to die out. O'Malley (2010) suggests that this might be because of the impact of government on small parties. The experience of Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland seems to bear this out. The party has made steady progress and in 2011 was larger than any of the minor parties since the PDs in 1987. It is approaching the size of the Labour Party in the 1997, 2002 and 2007 elections. In short it seems to be moving from minor to mainstream party.

In this chapter we will ask if Sinn Féin could truly break the mould of Irish politics by moving to overtake Fianna Fáil or the Labour party and become a mainstream party, or is it likely to remain at best a cameo player, which may have some relevance because of its coalition or blackmail potential. We can attempt to answer this question, which essentially looks to the future by examining the nature of Sinn Féin as it stands. We have some expectations of mainstream and minor parties in Ireland, which may differ from mainstream and minor parties in other countries. Mainstream parties tend to be heterogeneous in their support base; so the three established parties in Ireland tend to have broadly stable support across class, gender and age. Their support also tends to be reasonably evenly divided throughout the country, rather than focused in a small number of strongholds, often associated with individual politicians. Because minor parties often depend on a small number of notable political figures, the political organisation is often personalised and less rule-based than in major parties. Minor parties tend to be ideologically on the fringes, whereas mainstream parties tend to be more centrist, or more difficult to pin down in policy terms. By looking at how Sinn Féin performs on these areas, we can make a better informed judgement as to whether Sinn Féin is likely to move centre stage.

There is the paucity of literature on Sinn Féin as a 'normal' political party. Most works deal with the more violent wing of the organisation the IRA and its involvement in the move away from conflict. We are interested primarily in the party in the Republic – though we make references to it Northern Ireland. However a number of new works do consider the party in normalised politics. Murray and Tonge (2005) look at Sinn Féin policies

beyond just the constitutional issues, although the main focus of the book is to tell the story of its movement to party politics. Maillot (2005) devotes a good deal of space to studying 'New Sinn Féin' and it finds that it is a leftist party with strong equality agenda. Another study of Sinn Féin as a normal political party found no evidence that it is anything other than a radical left-wing party. Policies which are associated with the right such as Sinn Féin's use of public-private partnerships to fund education in Northern Ireland, in contravention of its stated policy, are examples of the party's 'pragmatism' (Doyle 2005: 7).

This chapter builds on this nascent work. It first explores the roots and history of the party, its growth strategies, policies, support bases and organisation in order to decide how best to Sinn Féin's role in the Irish political party system can be understood. It concludes that its policies are broadly left of centre and its nationalism has undergone a transformation in line with the transformation of the situation in Northern Ireland. There is strong potential for growth as it builds a grassroots based campaigning organisation that targets the socially marginalised and young people. It may also benefit from being seen as the main opposition party (as Fianna Fáil struggles to criticise the coalition's policies due to its central role in the economic crisis). However it also faces challenges as it seeks to move the leadership of the party from the charismatic old-guard to a new younger grouping and to maintain consistency north and south of the border in radically different contexts in order to fulfil its own claim to be an all-Ireland party.

Roots of the party

While Sinn Féin (variously translated as 'Ourselves', inelegantly as 'We Ourselves' or incorrectly as 'Ourselves Alone') was founded in 1905 by non-violent nationalist, Arthur Griffith, it has split so many times that practically all political parties in Ireland (and none) can claim to be descended from this original party. Sinn Féin was a small, insignificant party in Ireland until following the 1916 Rising it became the focus for the electoral efforts of the unsuccessful military revolt. The British wrongly assumed Sinn Féin had been behind the uprising. Before that it was a nationalist party looking for a joint-sovereignty arrangement to achieve similar terms to Hungary in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Following the Rising it was taken over by the only leader of the Rising not to be executed, Éamon de Valera. In the December 1918 general election it received 47 per cent of the vote on the whole island, and had all the seats been contested would probably have received two-thirds of the vote (Sinn Féin won 25 seats without a contest). Though some of this support can be put down to Sinn Féin's anti-conscription policy, the party's success is a measure of the extent to which Irish political consciousness had changed in the previous years. It took 73 out of the 105 Irish seats and proclaimed the First Dáil (Assembly). The party split initially on treaty arrangements with Britain. Cumann na nGaedheal was formed by those TDs (MPs) who

accepted the terms of the Treaty, which controversially included the provision of an oath of allegiance to the British Monarch (partition was not seen as the crucial issue at the time). Sinn Féin split again when the majority of its remaining TDs left to form Fianna Fáil over Sinn Féin's policy of abstention from post-Treaty Dála (Assemblies). What Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (the successor party to Cumann na nGaedheal) did not disagree about was the outlook of the new state – these revolutionaries were Gaelic, conservative Catholics (English 2003: 25). Sinn Féin was now a largely irrelevant rump party ignored by its military wing and master, the IRA. However, its support tended to come from people disillusioned with the conservatism of Fianna Fáil. Further splits on the issue of abstention led to the creation of Clann na Poblachta and Republican Congress. Pathetic IRA military campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s and the assumption of radical socialist policies further reduced its relevance.

In the late 1960s the IRA seized the opportunities provided by Unionist over-reaction to civil rights demands and assumed responsibility for 'defending' Catholic areas. The Sinn Féin/ IRA leadership in Dublin, which had become increasingly leftist and engaged in politics, was seen as militarily inactive and a split ensued. One of the Provisional's leaders, Joe Cahill,

'had a feeling that ultra-left politics were taking over. As far as I was concerned, the main purpose of the IRA and Sinn Féin was to break the connection with England and get the Brits from Ireland.'

For the existing leadership of Sinn Féin, Cahill and people like him, 'were simply right-wingers living in a fantasy world and clinging to a romantic past' (Taylor 1998: 24). The Provisional IRA was founded in Belfast in 1970 with its political wing Provisional Sinn Féin. This is what is commonly referred to by the name Sinn Féin. Official Sinn Féin, as the original party became known, went on to split again; the splinter group going on (eventually) to merge with the Irish Labour Party.

The leadership of Provisional Sinn Féin (hereafter Sinn Féin) was northern-based and closely connected with the armed campaign of the Provisional IRA. Anti-communism was high on the agenda for the new organisation. *Republican News*, the Belfast organisation's mouthpiece complained that 'into executive posts both in the IRA and Sinn Féin, the Red agents infiltrated...young men and women were brainwashed with the teachings and propaganda of the...Red infiltrators' (Moloney 2002: 75). The same paper later claimed 'our allegiance is to God and Ireland' (Moloney 2002: 75). For one IRA member, an early leader of the Provisionals, Billy McKee, was 'an arch-Catholic bigot' (English 2003: 112). However, this conservatism was not uniform in the Provisional movement and the ever present tensions between conservatives and socialists re-emerged. As time went on a debate on Sinn Féin's politics took place and a left-wing agenda became current, but by the late 1970s

Gerry Adams rejected the idea that Sinn Féin was or should be an extreme-left organisation, declaring ‘There is no Marxist influence within Sinn Féin. I know of no one in Sinn Féin who is a Marxist or would be influenced by Marxism’ (Murray and Tonge 2005: 152). By the mid-1980s Adams claimed that socialism, never a popular ideology in Ireland, was not on the agenda (Maillot 2005: 104). From the early 1980s an electoral strategy was pursued and Sinn Féin moved to moderate its public statements to make them more acceptable to the broader nationalist community in Northern Ireland. But Sinn Féin was still largely seen as beyond the pale in the Republic of Ireland, never receiving over two per cent support. Continued negotiations with the British and Irish governments led to an IRA ceasefire in 1994 and eventually to the Belfast Agreement, a consociational peace agreement institutionalising the ethno-national divisions in Northern Ireland, in 1998. This ‘peace’ was broadly welcomed with Sinn Féin dramatically increasing its support in Northern Ireland as it became seen as the party best able to ensure the implementation of the Belfast Agreement for nationalists. In the south the party’s increased acceptability enabled it to increase its support base. However its campaigns in the South (understandably) had less to do with the ‘peace process’ agenda, but emphasised and campaigned on issues such as housing shortages, bin charges and anti-social behaviour – the concerns of its voters in deprived urban areas.

Sinn Féin's growth strategy

These campaigns are fundamental to the party’s growth strategy. By operating in areas of deprivation Sinn Féin is able to persuade traditional non-voters that the party can address the issues which concern them. There have been many commentators who have argued that Sinn Féin’s growth may come from winning the votes of traditional Fianna Fáil voters who are angry or disappointed by the party’s recent performance. However Sinn Féin members and representatives are more focused on the traditional non-voting groups (Eoin Ó Broin, 2011). Winning the votes of these groups has greater potential to build a loyal Sinn Féin vote. If the party targeted the dissatisfied voters of another party there would be the risk that these voters would only temporarily vote Sinn Féin and would revert to voting for their former party once their anger dissipated.

These campaigns give the party and can-do image and can help the party differentiate itself as an activist or campaigning organisation as opposed to just a political party concerned with gaining and maintaining power for its own sake (Doyle 2005: 9). They also allow the organisation to maintain a larger active membership than other small, and arguably larger, parties. These campaigns provide a focus for the membership in the respective areas particularly during quiet times in the electoral cycle. However the party also recognises that different strategies are appropriate for different constituency and that these campaigning activities that are effective in socially deprived areas will not be successful in more middle-class areas

where the profile of candidates or representatives may be more important (Daithí McKay, 2011). This is a lesson the party has learned from its experience in Northern Ireland, despite the very different contexts, where it has success outside the working-class areas it seems confined to in the South.

Another area of potential growth which the party focuses on is winning votes from young voters. This is seen as a strong area of possible expansion. There is a view within the party that these voters represent fertile ground for the Sinn Féin message for two reasons. Firstly young people are seen as less attached to a party than those who have a life-long history of voting for a particular party. The current economic difficulties which the country faces are also viewed as presenting the party with an opportunity to persuade young voters not to follow generational voting patterns which are so deterministic within the Irish context. Secondly younger people have less direct experience of the party's involvement in violent republicanism. This lack of direct experience means that Sinn Féin may not be as toxic to these voters as it was to their parents or grandparents.

This growth strategy that involves targeting traditional non-voters and young voters leads to slower growth than would be achieved by an electoral swing. There are only a certain number of young people coming part of the electorate in each election and votes from traditional non-voters are won by labour-intensive campaigning on social issues. However this slow and steady growth is seen as a positive form of growth by the party. While there has been excitement regarding potential electoral swings and a sudden break-through in the lead up to certain elections the dangers of such rapid growth is apparent. Such swings can easily be reversed and if they result in a single term in government any gains made can quickly be undone as the Green Party has recently learned (Eoin Ó Broin, 2011). Slow and steady growth in Northern Ireland has proven to be a successful strategy for the party and this experience informs growth plans in the South.

What kind of party?

The strategy of slow growth indicates that the party has no expectation to become mainstream in the short term. Minor parties seem to be qualitatively different to mainstream parties in a number of ways. In this section we investigate to what extent Sinn Féin appears like a minor or mainstream party.

Ideology

Sinn Féin is unusual in that it contests elections in two jurisdictions, Northern Ireland and the Republic. It is systemically in very different positions in the two places. In Northern Ireland it is one of the largest parties, and the largest party within its ethno-national block. In the Republic it has been a minor party with just a handful of seats. In

Northern Ireland, the unusual governmental structure means that it has consistently been represented in the devolved government there – though there is no opposition. In the Republic the party has not just consistently been in opposition, it has been assumed ‘uncoalitionable’ in a *conventio ad excludendum* among the other political parties that they would not enter government with Sinn Féin. This is not unlike the similar convention in Italy that any coalition was preferable to one that included the Communist Party. Some though have alleged that Enda Kenny suggested approaching Sinn Féin in 2007 in a bid to form a government (see Arnold and O’Toole 2011: 50-54). It is not clear whether its systemically different positions in the two jurisdictions mean that it has presented itself in different ways to voters in the two places. In the Republic of Ireland it presents itself as a radical left-wing, even anti-system party. In Northern Ireland, even though it actually is anti-system, its support among middle-class Catholics might mean that it tends to offer a more mainstream position.

In one area it is qualitatively different from other parties in the Republic. It alone has a radically nationalist policy towards Northern Ireland, and the British position there. Yet it has positions which are not at all nationalist, or exclusive in tone in areas such as immigration. O’Malley (2008) argued that Sinn Féin’s position in the Republic was akin to those of what are commonly termed radical right-wing parties, but which might more accurately be termed populist nationalist parties. However unlike other populist nationalist parties, Sinn Féin is among the most openly pro-immigrant parties in Ireland. Ireland has seen a rapid rise in the immigrant population: from negligible levels to ten per cent of the population in as many years. While a Labour party leader has expressed concerns about immigrants driving down wages and job security in ‘a race to the bottom’ (Rabbinette 2006), Sinn Féin has consistently called for greater supports to immigrants and in its 2002 manifesto called for ‘the right to work or study for asylum seekers while their claims are being processed’ (Sinn Féin 2002: 16). It explicitly states that immigrants should not be blamed for housing shortages or hospital waiting lists. Sinn Féin is vocal in its support for a pluralist society and its opposition to sectarianism.

Though the attitude to modern immigrants is welcoming, the attitude to those who settled in Ireland centuries ago is hostile. Gerry Adams has written many books in which he sets out his political beliefs. These tend not to show a desire for a pluralist society. His justification for his campaign is that Ireland has a right to self-determination which the British prevent the Irish exercising. By contrast unionists cannot claim this right:

‘they are a national minority; a significant minority but a minority nonetheless. To bestow the power of veto over national independence and sovereignty on a national minority is in direct

contravention of the principle of self-determination' (Adams 1988 cited in Whyte 1990: 134).

As Whyte points out, Adams assumed what is to be proved. There seems no recognition that Ulster Protestants may themselves form a separate nation with its own identity and rights. Murray and Tonge (2005: 165) report that in 1987 early drafts of the document *Scenario for Peace* contained a suggestion that Unionists unable to accept a united Ireland could be repatriated (presumably to somewhere they are not from). Even post-Belfast Agreement Adams (2006) displays basic majoritarian instincts by suggesting that unity can come about when there is a 50 per cent plus one majority in favour of unity. Nor does the attitude to recent immigrants sit easily with the activities of Sinn Féin/ IRA during the Troubles, many of which were blatantly sectarian such as the murder of Protestants in Tullyvallen Orange Hall, La Mon, or the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bomb. While it may support the plight of modern day immigrants, the descendants of those who travelled to Ireland 400 years ago appear less welcome.

Sinn Féin is similar to populist nationalist parties in other ways. It has consistently opposed EU treaties and regards the single currency as a diminution of Irish sovereignty. Though it has tempered its language against globalisation, its economic policies emphasise support for small indigenous business. Sinn Féin (2002: 22) argues that:

current government policy is over dependent on inward investors...The same quantity and quality of resources made available to inward investors should be made available to indigenous enterprises... In a small economy like Ireland's we need to provide a sound economic base and infrastructure that is not dependent on the whims of international investors.

Its main policy proposals focus on support for small business and local brands, though it calls for maintenance of the low rate of corporation tax. In education it calls for greater investment and for Irish culture and language teaching to be improved. Unusually for an avowed left-wing party, the document focuses heavily on crime. It calls for community policies, victims' rights and measures to drug pushing and anti-social behaviour. The focus is on populist local action and a distrust of the state. Sinn Féin also gives some attention to human rights. This may be interpreted as being a post-material concern, consistent with its radically liberal-left self-description, but others have shown that the appeal to human rights in Northern Ireland is less a reflection of post-materialist values but a reflection of politics in that place (Curry and O'Connell 2000).

For a socially radical party Sinn Féin's social policies are at times surprisingly conservative or non-committal. For instance Sinn Féin joined the DUP to support a motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly (20 June 2000) against extending the 1967 UK Abortion Act to Northern Ireland. Ambivalence on the abortion issue may only reflect social realities in

Ireland which makes *all* Irish politicians uneasy. Adams, despite describing himself as a devout Catholic, also said he would not oppose gay marriages. However he was willing to allow Sinn Féin participate in a parade from which gays were banned. Mixed with this are calls which are typical of a radical left liberal party. The party is against the war in Iraq; calls for an end to the US blockade of Cuba; and for nuclear disarmament.

But an Irish election is a series of small local elections. It might be that the positions taken in manifestos (which are never read by voters anyway) may differ from the message being put to voters in deprived urban areas, or that different constituencies receive different messages. When one looks at Sinn Féin campaigns one can see it making essentially populist appeals. Though it campaigns as an environmentally sensitive party it has opposed the efforts of councils to force householder to recycle by making them pay for refuse collection. It gives the incorrect impression that large businesses do not have to pay its waste disposal. One campaign is for a motorway to be built to the north-west of the country. A willingness to change ideology was noted by Moloney (2002: 197) who is generally regarded as antagonistic to Sinn Féin, found that the:

“move to the left” which Adams had launched to isolate the old guard in Sinn Féin, was eventually dropped as were other policies that characterized and even defined the Provisionals under his leadership in the 1970s and much of the 1980s’

Excepting the policy on Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin policy documents do not appear radical; rather (like other Irish parties) they are often statements of desired outcomes rather than actual policies to achieve those outcomes. Where policies are proposed these too are platitudinous. For instance (2002: 7),

Sinn Féin supports the development of a comprehensive all-Ireland strategy to eradicate poverty and deprivation in Ireland. This must be properly resourced and carried out within a specified time frame.

It might be hard to see a coherent political philosophy but arguably this is no different to other mainstream Irish parties. This would indicate that Sinn Féin, as Doyle implied, is pragmatic enough to make the shift policy to the centre if needed to move to the mainstream in politics in the Republic. A systematic study of Irish party manifestoes using computer-coded word-scoring find that, apart from its distinctive position on Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin appears ‘interested in moving into the territory of the mainstream Irish parties rather than marking out a distinctive position on the liberal left’ (Benoit and Laver 2003: 104). Indeed these authors point to the party’s focus on urban crime, drug dealing, and the support for small and indigenous business, which would position the party closer to conservative parties than on the left. Overall their study finds Sinn Féin to be an economically centrist party and socially the most conservative party after Fianna Fáil. More recently Suiter and Farrell (2011) found that in an analysis of the party manifestos

Sinn Féin maintained a distinctly left wing stance compared to the other left wing parties which had moved to the centre in 2011. This analysis also shows that Fine Gael had moved sharply leftwards, occupying a position traditionally associated with the Labour Party.

Other measures of party policy exist. An expert survey conducted by the Benoit and Laver, where academic experts are asked to place parties on a number of different dimensions, show Sinn Féin to be clearly a party of the left in both North and South (Benoit and Laver 2006: see Appendix D). In a candidate survey conducted by Gilland-Lutz and Farrington (2006), party candidates to the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly election were asked to place themselves on scales measuring policy positions on a number of dimensions. In these, Sinn Féin candidates placed themselves as the most liberal on moral issues, most environmentally friendly, most tolerant of minorities, and among the most left-wing of the four mainstream parties in a generic left-right scale. On the EU it was at the mid-point, much more Eurosceptic than the SDLP, and more pro-European than the unionist parties. It should be noted that this was based on a very small number of candidates, just 13 from Sinn Féin.

John Garry in a study of voters in Northern Ireland finds that Sinn Féin voters are no more left wing than those from the SDLP, usually regarded as a centrist party (Garry 2009). Nor did it differ from the Unionist parties on the subjective left-right scale. Sinn Féin voters were no different to the SDLP voters on social issues, where the two nationalist parties were more liberal than the unionist parties. Overall there is mixed evidence on the placement of Sinn Féin as a party. This ambiguity and the apparent willingness of the party to adapt its policies to the needs of the electoral campaign indicate that it is more like a pragmatic, mainstream party than an ideologically committed fringe party.

Support bases

A party's voters can tell us a good deal about a party. If its voters are systematically more left-wing than other voters we might expect that the party itself is left wing. If its voters are working class, or predominantly urban, older or male, this might indicate something about the party. For instance Given (2005: 46) finds that 'in general, survey evidence indicates that extreme right voters are predominantly male, blue collar workers or small business owners who have a low level of education'. This is because these are 'modernisation losers' – people who neo-liberal policies of free trade and increased globalisation of manufacturing and services has left worse off. The concomitant downgrading of public services and welfare supports hits them hardest, and the fault of immigrants may appear obvious to them. Having become disillusioned with the state and the liberal establishment these people will have anti-system, anti-establishment attitudes. Garry (2006) shows that in Northern Ireland there is not much evidence that Sinn Féin's voters are much different in

terms of policy outlook or social base. This would tally with our view of Sinn Féin as a mainstream party in Northern Ireland.

A respected Irish political commentator proposed that there are two types of Sinn Féin voter in the Republic. Traditional anti-British republicans mainly in rural areas and people living in deprived urban working class areas disenchanted with the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy and the established parties (Collins 2003: 34). Where the former may be conservative and Catholic the latter has the potential to be more radical. Sinn Féin’s support in the Republic is strongest in rural border counties and in working class areas of Dublin.

One of the unusual features of Irish political parties is their heterogeneous basis for support (Weeks 2009). Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and even Labour have had unusually even support across class, age group and sex. Tables 1 and 2 shows some demographic characteristics of Sinn Féin voters in the last four elections. Overall we see an increase in support for Sinn Féin. Within that the figures are very much in line with what we might call fringe parties, of either the left or right. Sinn Féin’s voters are (statistically and substantively) significantly more likely to be working class. There is an obvious and strong relationship with age. Support among the young is much higher than among over pensioners. Should Sinn Féin voters be similar to radical nationalist party voters one would expect to see a gender gap. This also exists.

Table 1: Sinn Féin voters 1997 to 2007

	1997	2002	2007
Total	3.3	7.1	7.3
Middle class	1.4	4.5	4.6
Working class	5.0	10.3	10.8
Farmers	1.0	2.4	3.5
18-24	5.4	14.5	10.7
25-34	4.4	8.7	9.9
35-49	3.1	6.7	7.9
50-64	1.8	4.6	5.6
65+	1.8	3.6	1.5
Male	4.4	8.4	8.4
Female	2.0	5.8	6.1

Sources: own analysis of RTÉ/ Lansdowne exit polls 1997, 2002 and 2007.

These tables show that Sinn Féin lacks the even distribution across social class that the three mainstream Irish parties possess. There is remarkably little difference in class support for the Labour party or Fianna Fáil and the differences across class in support for Fine Gael, though they exist,

are not great if we consider the magnitude of the party's support. For Sinn Féin we still see different support levels across class, age and sex. However these are perhaps less pronounced than we observe in earlier elections, which might indicate that Sinn Féin is not just increasing but also broadening its support base. Particularly encouraging for Sinn Féin might be that its younger voters seem to remain with the party as they get older.

Table 2. Breakdown of party support in 2011

	Fine Gael	Labour	Fianna Fáil	Sinn Féin
Total	36.1	19.4	17.4	9.9
AB	41	22	14	6
C1	36	23	14	9
C2	30	23	15	14
DE	30	21	16	17
Farmers	53	5	23	7
18-24	31	24	12	14
25-34	30	26	12	13
35-49	35	24	12	11
50-64	35	22	16	10
65+	39	18	25	5
Male	36	20	15	12
Female	35	23	15	9

Sources: Marsh and Cunningham (2011) and Appendices in *How Ireland Voted 2011*.

Less encouraging might be that the party still does not get a seat bonus. This is because unlike other, mainstream parties there is still quite a deal of antagonism towards the party. In 2011 when asked whether they likely to vote for Sinn Féin on a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 was completely unlikely 52 per cent of voters score 1 for Sinn Féin – more even than for Fianna Fáil which was especially unpopular in that election (Marsh and Cunningham 2011: 177). Sinn Féin polarises voters, as we might expect a minor, ideologically-driven party to: for instance, the PDs especially after 1989.

Another feature of the election is that Sinn Féin did not take support from those voters who had voted for Fianna Fáil in 2007 but defecting from the party in 2011. These went mainly to Fine Gael, Labour and independents, and Sinn Féin's proportion was just 9.4 per cent. This perhaps demonstrates that Sinn Féin's growth strategy is working, and that it did not just 'borrow' votes from Fianna Fáil in 2011, which might in changed circumstances return to that party.

The geographic spread of its support also indicates something about the nature of a party. Mainstream parties tend to get support reasonably

evenly across constituencies, whereas minor parties, because they are more dependent on party strongholds and personalities have a much greater variation in support across constituencies. For instance, North Kerry might be a stronghold for Sinn Féin because of Martin Ferris, but in the neighbouring constituencies it is not strong enough to run a candidate. To measure this spread in support we use the coefficient of variation. This takes the average of each constituency's percentage support for a party and divides it by the standard deviation, a measure of the spread of each party's results. The coefficient of variation is an adjusted measure of spread that takes into account the magnitude of the mean and so makes it comparable across parties. The coefficient is scale free but in this case has a theoretical minimum of zero. Zero indicates that the party's support is distributed perfectly evenly through a country. In Ireland we might think of this as a measure of how mainstream is a party's support base.

For Fine Gael in 2011 its CV is 0.24, Labour's is 0.45, Fianna Fáil's 0.28. The Sinn Féin coefficient of variation is greater at 0.70, though not as large as that for the ULA (1.76) or the Green Party (0.95). The Sinn Féin figure is comparable to the PDs' coefficient of variation in 1987. About the most evenly distributed support of a political party in Ireland was in 1997 where Fianna Fáil's coefficient of variation was .17. Sinn Féin is less nationally based than the three established parties in Ireland.

A more intensive study of Sinn Féin's voters in 2011 than Table 2 allows demonstrates that the party's voters are closer to the mainstream of Irish society than the party's policies might make us expect. Using data from the Irish National Election Study in 2011 we can estimate the position of Sinn Féin's voters, and compare these to the voting electorate as a whole. On left-right self-placement, Sinn Féin's voters in the Republic's 2011 general election places themselves at 4.6 on a 0 to 10 scale where 10 means most right. This compares to an average position of 6.0 for the general population, 5.4 for the Labour Party and 4.6 for Socialist Party voters. The attitude to immigrants of Sinn Féin's voters is marginally less welcoming than the mainstream parties. On Europe it is no more hostile than any of the parties – in fact only the Socialist Party's voters appear to stand out. On social issues – the position of women in the home, abortion and belief in god – Sinn Féin voters are significantly more conservative than compared to the general population. Sinn Féin voters do not appear to be typical of supporters of a radical left party, and in fact are quite similar in many respects to Fianna Fáil's voters.

Organisation

Organisationally Sinn Féin's strengths also represent considerable challenges to maintain coherence. The party portrays itself as a grassroots campaigning organisation. Members are quick to point out that the parliamentary party has no special role within the organisation in relation to issues such as candidate selection or policy development. They argue

that the party is not hierarchical and point to the fact that all those employed full-time by the party earned the average industrial wage in order to signal that elected representatives do not become disconnected (Daithi Mc Kay, 2011). However certain high profile representatives undoubtedly exercise a large amount of control. One can see in the decision to field a candidate in the presidential election in 2011 that the leadership can effectively make a decision which will then be ratified by the party's organisational structures.

Numerous books make the point that Sinn Féin and the IRA are essentially two branches of the same organisation. It is also obvious that within the IRA factional disputes are sometimes ended using violence. One work in particular alleges that Gerry Adams has been the effective leader of both branches since before he became the titular leader of Sinn Féin in 1983. The insinuation is that Adams' critics have been silenced, some through intimidation or even murder. Moloney (2002) in particular suggests that the organisation is tightly controlled by the leader and a cabal around him. Adams tenure as leader (especially when compared with his predecessors) would certainly indicate that Sinn Féin is a leader-driven party.

One Sinn Féin TD has said about Adams that he 'has the charisma of a pop star' (Rafter 2005: 6). Adams dominates the press coverage of the party. He is regarded as its main electoral asset and within the Provisional organisation he 'commands almost unswerving support and inspires deep loyalty...He is the strong leader. He has the quality of decisiveness' (Rafter 2005: 8, 10). For others he is the 'undisputed leader of Sinn Féin' (Maillot 2005: 98). In policy terms, the move toward political strategy was Adams own strategy which he pursued successfully if slowly. That the Sinn Féin leader can direct the IRA can be demonstrated by the IRA's willingness to turn off its violent campaign for electoral purposes. If military hard-men controlled the IRA, this would not happen.

This strong leadership undoubtedly had the benefits of maintaining coherence within the party and allowing it to move away from violence towards constitutional politics. However organising a party around a strong individual also brings with it challenges. Firstly if and when Adams retires from his central role a massive power vacuum may be left within the party and the attention his profile gains the organisation electorally will be lost. There are clearly attempts being made to build up high profiles for representatives such as Pearse Doherty, Mary-Lou McDonald to enable them to become similar electoral assets. However the fact there is no one clear leader to take over from Adams may result in a divisive leadership battle. Furthermore Adams has been able to unite the party North and South; whether there exists a successor who could maintain this unity is an important question for the party's future as a cross-border entity.

This position as a cross-border entity has been an asset to the party in a number of ways. Given that the election cycles in the two jurisdictions are not in sync the party can call on its northern members to assist south of the border during campaigns. As one Northern representative put it 'we come south en masse' (Daithi Mc Kay, 2011). Furthermore the party can learn from its experiences in the North. Party members highlight how being in coalition in Northern Ireland has taught the party how to coalesce with those it is diametrically opposed to and how to negotiate for the implementation of its policies. The party in Northern Ireland is future into a journey that it hopes to make in the South (Daithi Mc Kay, 2011).

Despite the lessons the party can learn from its experiences in the North its position as a cross-border entity also challenges its organisational coherence. Sinn Féin's experiences north and south of the border are so divergent and the contexts so different that maintain unity is a massive challenge. The different contexts in relation to policy making on issues such as health and education pose problems for the party but it tries to overcome these by 'using the different tools to achieve the same aims. While this can lead to coherence in manifestos alone it does not overcome the challenges posed by the party's different levels of organisation north and south of the border. In Northern Ireland the party is the main party of nationalists from all socio-economic groups and is in a powerful position on councils and in the Assembly. South of the border its leadership on councils is limited to the border region and it is in a weaker position in parliament. These differences lead to different focuses and in light of this a strong frame work needs to be in place to ensure unity.

Nevertheless compared to other small parties in Ireland Sinn Féin is remarkably well-organised and active. It is not a cadre party in the way the PDs might have been. There does seem to be an active membership visible at elections, and Ard Fheiseanna (party conferences) are organised democratically (on paper at least) and do not always produce decisions that the leadership suggest, although the leadership has been able to reverse decisions subsequently. The membership is also active in community issues, and this is possibly one reason for its success in the Republic of Ireland. The issues on which it campaigns tend to be populist in nature, and are not always consistent with the radical left party, Sinn Féin portrays itself as. Anti-drugs campaigns have been high on Sinn Féin's list of activities, and given the types of communities Sinn Féin aims to represent it is unsurprising. After Fianna Fáil it was probably the best funded party receiving funds from US supporters and there is evidence to suggest from illegal activities. Certainly there seems no doubt that the IRA was involved in bank robberies to fund its campaigns and that the electoral campaigns were regarded as one part of the overall movement.

Maintaining links between the parliamentary and local parts of the organisations is important to the party and it holds weekly meetings between TDs/ Assembly members and the local councillors and organisers

on the ground. This allows for communication of issues and priorities in both directions. The party's organisational structure and framework of meetings also brings together members from north and south of the border and this may help to avoid the aforementioned possible divisions based on the different contexts in which the party operates. Furthermore as the party has increased its representation in the Dáil cooperation has become easier. Previously TDs were forced to take on a large number of portfolios. This made it more difficult for them to have the necessary in-depth knowledge of lower profile areas needed to effectively work with their counterpart in the Assembly. It is now much easier for TDs to be on top of their brief and thus to work with the party's minister or spokesperson in the issue in the North.

Future directions

In the immediate future Sinn Féin has an opportunity to position itself as the effective opposition in the Dáil. While Fianna Fáil has more TDs it may find it difficult to criticise the policies of the Labour-Fine Gael coalition because of its role in the economic crisis and its strategy in the election 2011 of supporting the strictures of the EU-IMF agreement. Sinn Féin benefits from having more active members than other small parties and uses these effectively to campaign on social issues. The party aims to maximise potential growth by first setting up working groups in areas and nurturing them into full scale branches (Eoin Ó Broin, 2011).

However the party faces a number of challenges. Its position in power in Northern Ireland may offer important lessons but it also allows electoral opponents in the South to draw attention to policy inconsistencies and may damage the party's self-promoted image as an anti-system party. Furthermore its organisation around a strong and charismatic leader for a considerable period may result in leadership issues in the future. While there are clearly a number of high profile representatives there is no single clear successor to Adams who could command loyalty and maintain valuable unity. Sinn Féin's slow-growth strategy clearly worked in Northern Ireland, but it was different in that it could not be left behind because of its control of the IRA. It cannot hope that the same strategy would succeed in the south. In the Republic the party is less relevant, and it would be unusual if it as a radically left-wing party managed to become as large as one of the mainstream parties. Another route to relevance might be to move to the centre and become 'coalitionable' – but this is risky in that then it might alienate its current followers. That said, we can see that the party's voters are not distinct in terms of policy. In ways the party may be at a crossroads as to whether to remain a fringe party or move to the mainstream of Irish politics.

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