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Mainstream Revolutionaries: Sinn Féin as a "Normal" Political Party?

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Despite the seismic shift of Sinn Féin from being the "mouthpiece" of the Provisional Irish Republican Army to the largest nationalist force in Northern Ireland, the party continues to project its objectives within the revolutionary politics and tradition of 1916. Whilst various groups across the island of Ireland stress their loyalty to Irish independence and allegiance to their republican forefathers, 2016 also plays host to devolved assembly elections in Northern Ireland. The centenary of the Easter Rising is therefore a poignant moment to reassess republican politics, more specifically, the relationship between the armed revolutionary tradition and constitutionalism. Within the post-peace process era Sinn Féin have been accused of maintaining an autocratic culture and an intra-party framework that is more representative of a clandestine revolutionary organisation than a political party. Yet, simultaneously, Sinn Féin have not been immune to the pressures experienced by other modern political parties, bound by the laws of electoral competition and driven by office-seeking priorities. In order to explore Sinn Féin within the modern political arena, this article firstly examines the broader debate surrounding how armed groups make the transition into constitutional politics. Secondly, public opinion survey data is used to judge the basis of Sinn Féin's electoral appeal. Finally, internal party documents are used to examine party structure, intra-party democracy, and professionalisation in order to judge the extent to which Sinn Féin have completed the transition from being a "mouthpiece" to their armed counterpart, towards being a "normal" political party.

Keywords Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland, peace process, republicanism, Sinn Féin

> [The objectives of Sinn Féin are to] Bring the Proclamation of the Republic of Easter 1916 into effective operation and to establish the Republic, representative of the people of Ireland, based on that Proclamation.[1]

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As of 2003, Sinn Féin became the largest nationalist party in the Northern Irish Assembly, overtaking their more moderate rivals, the SDLP. This moment symbolised a remarkable transformation for Sinn Féin as up until the close of the twentieth century, the party supported an Irish republican "armed struggle" as a justifiable form of resistance to British rule in Northern Ireland. Despite the seismic shift of Sinn Féin, the opening quote from the party's constitution and rules demonstrates how the party continues to project their objectives within the revolutionary politics and tradition of 1916.

The role and position of Sinn Féin in the decades before the Northern Irish peace process has been described as "a fringe anti-system protest organisation" functioning as a "mouthpiece" for, and subordinate to, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA).[2] Up until the mid-1980s, the prominence of armed struggle over political participation placed Sinn Féin as an "auxiliary" organisation to their armed counterparts.[3] Sinn Féin's republicanism of the twenty-first century, however, maintains a "wholly political focus."[4] Today, Sinn Féin bears many characteristics of a modern political party but they are unique in their past association with an armed organisation and lineage to a revolutionary tradition. Within global peace processes the path from revolutionary organisation to participating in established constitutional politics has been well trodden. Central to understanding conflict resolution and democratisation within a post-conflict context is the political transformation of groups away from an armed campaign towards constitutionalism. For groups to successfully make the transition to democratic parties they have to undergo re-structuring and develop more inclusive forms of internal governance.[5] Hopkins suggests that whilst Sinn Féin has "maintained the veneer of an anti-system party," where voters still continue to support the party on that basis, in reality it has been steadily institutionalised and incorporated into the political mainstream.[6]

Whilst various groups across the island of Ireland stress their loyalty to Irish independence and allegiance to their republican forefathers, 2016 also plays host to devolved assembly elections in Northern Ireland. The centenary of the Easter Rising therefore provides a poignant moment to reassess republican politics, more specifically, the interaction between constitutionalism and an armed revolutionary tradition. The first section of this article examines the broader debate surrounding how armed groups make the transition into constitutional politics. Secondly, analysis of public opinion survey data is used to judge the basis of Sinn Féin's electoral appeal. Finally, internal party documents are used to examine Sinn Féin's party structure, intra-party democracy, and professionalisation in order to explore the extent to which Sinn Féin have adapted to post-peace process politics. Whilst acknowledging Sinn Féin's all-Ireland structure and political role in the Republic, analysis mainly focuses on electoral performance within the post-Good Friday Agreement (GFA) context in Northern Ireland. Due to Sinn Féin's historical ties to paramilitarism and the party's justification of armed struggle up until the turn of the twenty-first century, examining the evolution of Sinn Féin also provides a unique contribution to the literature on how armed groups more broadly make the transition into constitutional politics.

Revolutionaries to Constitutionalists

There has been a growing amount of literature examining the evolution of armed groups into political parties within a post-conflict arena.[7] The transition from violent struggle to constitutionalism opens up the channels for political process engagement that is essential for sustainable peace, stability, and democracy. Parties that gain

greater political access through electoral success are more likely to support the post-conflict political settlement.[8] Therefore, central to the promotion of this political path is the extent to which parties are electorally rewarded. The adaptation into a broad-based, catch-all party that moves beyond a traditional support base is crucial to the success of any organisation previously supportive of an armed campaign.[9]

Groups making the transition from armed struggle to politics have to confront the demands of constitutionalism and adapt to the formal political process. Various factors impact the success of former "rebel" groups ranging from the longevity and intensity of conflict,[10] whether the group has been victorious or become the opposition,[11] and finally the nature of institutional arrangements such as the electoral system and dispersal of power.[12]

A common tendency within "rebel groups" is to be designed and organised in a way most conducive to conducting an irregular armed campaign requiring secrecy, clandestine operations, close-knit leadership group, and hierarchical command structures.[13] By contrast, executive power within political parties is typically less concentrated with more participatory and consensual decision-making.[14] The struggle between the militant group and civilian wings of a rebel organisation has an important impact on the way in which the political party organises.[15] For example, de Zeeuw argues that if the leader and main party candidates took an active part in violence then the structure will be more centralised, since the organisation will be more likely to take on the structure of the rebel movement.[16] The continuation of a centralised structure may encourage a stable support base and disciplined party but the continuation of an autocratic and hierarchical leadership also poses a challenge to the democratisation of party organisation.

Durable stability depends largely on whether former armed groups decide to adapt to, evade, or exit the post-conflict political arena.[17] Therefore, central to sustaining peace is for these parties to compete for power through ballots rather than bullets. Revolutionary organisations will have operated in different environments and emerged from different historical, institutional, and political contexts; it is therefore necessary to chart the gradual shifts within Sinn Féin and the PIRA.

Between Bullets and Ballots: Sinn Féin's Transition

The three decades of ethno-conflict in Northern Ireland known as "The Troubles" resulted in over 3,500 deaths.[18] During the PIRA's armed campaign (1969–2001), the IRA was responsible for almost half of these (1,735), the majority of targets being the police (Royal Ulster Constabulary) or British army personnel.[19] There has been much academic attention accounting for the evolution and adaptation of Sinn Féin and the disbandment and eventual "disappearance" of the PIRA. Explanations range from the un-winnability of the PIRA's war, the successful coercion and containment strategies of the British state, and the frustration of the rank and file.[20]

Undergoing various transformations and prone to organisational divisions, Sinn Féin has had a turbulent history, particularly over the relationship between armed struggle and politics. Up until the early 1980s, Sinn Féin was described as a "political front," which remained "subordinate to the terrorist organisation."[21] A change of tack was introduced during Sinn Féin's 1981 *Ard Fheis* (annual party conference), where the party's director of publicity Danny Morrison presented the dual strategy of "Armalite and ballot box." From this moment politics was offered a far more equal role to the armed campaign, repositioning Sinn Féin away from being the

subordinate "mouthpiece" of the PIRA to partner.[22] Electoral rewards soon followed. In the 1982 assembly election, Sinn Féin obtained 10% of the vote, signifying a major breakthrough for the party. During the 1983 Westminster elections, the party won 13.4% of the vote (43% of nationalist vote) with Gerry Adams winning the West Belfast seat.[23] By 1986, the position of politics prevailed further as the strategic decision was finally made at a party Ard Fheis to drop abstention to the Republic of Ireland (Leinster House).

Despite this early electoral success, the party never succeeded in attracting the majority of Catholic support whilst the PIRA continued its campaign, albeit as a more equal partner. By the mid-1980s, Sinn Féin was only able to retain a core 10–13% of the nationalist vote in Northern Ireland.[24] Sinn Féin were to soon suffer several electoral setbacks, losing 16 out of 59 council seats in 1989 and Gerry Adams, now party President, being defeated in West Belfast during the 1992 Westminster election. By the 1980s the PIRA were losing members, the British government were finding PIRA weapon caches, and high civilian casualties tempered much of the sympathy the movement had.[25] These political and military setbacks encouraged the party to develop a more sophisticated electoral strategy.[26]

The 1990s witnessed two PIRA ceasefires as the organisation entered formal negotiations with the British government to end the conflict. During this period the legacy of revolutionary republicanism was used to reiterate Sinn Féin's political message and justify continued involvement in the peace process. At the Easter Commemoration in 1997, the party's national chairperson Mitchel McLaughlin stated, "Sinn Féin will enter peace talks and finish the political task of the IRA's dead."[27] By 1998 Sinn Féin signed the GFA, agreeing to enter a power-sharing Assembly, and in 2005 the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning declared that "the IRA has destroyed all its arms."[28] The former days of the "Armalite and ballot box" strategy were replaced with just the ballot box. By the end of the twentieth century the shift away from an armed campaign to full absorption into constitutionalism went too far for some in abandoning republican principles, leading to splits within the movement.

During The Troubles, significant splits occurred on several occasions, leading to the formation of disparate "dissident" republican groups. The dropping of abstention to Dáil Éireann in 1986, was for some tantamount to an "act of treason," and led to the creation of Republican Sinn Féin and the Continuity IRA.[29] A decade later saw the emergence of the 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM) and the Real IRA, who disagreed with the direction of the peace process, particularly the Mitchell Principles of non-violence and the downgrading of armed struggle. The legacy of 1916 plays a crucial role for "dissident" groups in justifying their opposition to the peace process, whilst simultaneously discrediting Sinn Féin's republican credentials:

> The republic was claimed in 1916 as an all Ireland Republic, a 32 county Republic.... The British chose to ignore the democratic wish of Irish people... anybody that accepts the status quo at the minute is not a republican because i.e. they do not support the Republic. They support the Irish Free State or whatever they want to call it now, they support the Six County state and to be honest with you they're backing the British in Ireland by backing the peace process and to me that's not an actual republican.[30]

As well as delegitimising the position of Sinn Féin on a political level, the legacy of the Easter Rising is also used by dissidents to justify the continuation of armed struggle, despite the lack of popular support:

> The leaders of 1916, they were spat on by the people of Dublin as they were marched through the streets with Dublin's people waving Union Jacks in their face ... the IRA is always legitimate as long as there is a British occupation in this country.[31]

Recollecting the past enables events such as 1916 to transcend time. Memorials, commemorations, and martyrdom are reconstructed across the broad republican spectrum to justify opposing positions, be it an unwavering alignment to armed struggle, or, in Sinn Féin's case, a full commitment to constitutional politics.

Despite divisions occurring, via the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, Sinn Féin had made the slow, yet seismic, transition to eventually become the main nationalist political force in Northern Ireland. The willingness and ability of the party to modify its strategy to such an extent meant that by 2007 the party was "virtually unrecognisable" from its form in the early 1980s.[32] As long as the PIRA was still active, there was a ceiling to Sinn Féin's electoral success. With the PIRA "leaving the scene," Sinn Féin were rewarded electorally, therefore supporting the post-GFA dispensation proved a "logical political step."[33] The success of Sinn Féin reflects the party's progression towards being viewed as a purely political force with broader electoral appeal.

The "Rules of the Game": Sinn Féin as the Largest Nationalist Party

The centrality of revolutionary armed struggle in the early 1970s, to the dual strategy of "Armalite and ballot box" in the 1980s, led on to the gradual decline of the PIRA as the military wing of the republican movement. By 2003, Sinn Féin had become the largest nationalist party in the Assembly and by 2011 they gained 26.2% of the vote share in Northern Ireland, 10% clear of their nationalist rivals, the SDLP.[34] Despite the compromises made by the party, and suffering several organisational splits, the majority of nationalists in Northern Ireland now favoured Sinn Féin.[35]

Party strategy and organisation is dependent on numerous variables within the post-conflict environment, one of those being the institutional framework. It is therefore necessary to assess the political context within which Sinn Féin operates and how the "rules of the game" within the post-GFA context have impacted party politics. Drawing upon recent public opinion survey data from the General Election Survey (2015), this section will also highlight the electoral appeal of the party as the basis of Sinn Féin strategy.

The GFA installed consociational principles to create a Northern Ireland Assembly dominated by a power-sharing executive and subject to voting mechanisms that require cross-community consent.[36] Within Northern Irish politics, ethnicity and identity remain the dominant political cleavages. For example, in the 2015 General Election only 3.8% of those identifying as nationalists voted outside the nationalist party bloc.[37] In the same survey, only 5.5% of nationalists were very likely to transfer their lower preference vote to a unionist candidate in future elections.[38] Therefore ethnic identities in Northern Ireland are described as "inflexible, resilient, crystallised and hard."[39]

A tendency of consociational systems of democracy is the impulse towards ethnic outbidding, a process through which parties within the same ethno-national bloc strive to portray themselves as ''the true defenders'' of the group's position and interests whilst simultaneously ''undercutting the position of in-group rivals.''[40] The claims and counter-claims from intra-group rivalry may resemble an ''ethnic auction'' as the parties throw accusations of treachery and betrayal in order to bid for dominance within their ethno-national block.[41]

Within post-conflict contexts, groups will attempt to defend their cause. The negotiations that accompany any peace process are likely to antagonise sensitivities where concessions may be interpreted as weakness.[42] The result being a zero-sum language that emphasises mono-ethnic identities by engaging in emotive ethnic appeals suggesting their group's vital interests are in danger of being sold out, and they are best placed to protect these concerns.[43] The following from Sinn Féin's 1998 Six County manifesto being a typical example of such discourse:

> The days of unionist intransigence and obstruction are not over. There is much work ahead if we are to deliver change in this transitional phase. Sinn Féin intends to push the Good Friday Agreement to its outer limits and beyond.[44]

Within-bloc competition may develop a centrifugal dynamic as voters are more likely to switch from the moderate to supposedly more extreme parties due to the perception they are more effective in voicing the concerns of their community.[45] Within the post-conflict politics, the DUP and Sinn Féin quickly established themselves as the largest parties within the opposing blocs at the expense of the more moderate UUP and the SDLP.

Mitchell et al. have labelled Sinn Féin as an ''ethnic tribune'' party, pragmatic in terms of seeking resources and institutional incentives yet simultaneously intransigent with regards to identity and the tendency to ''reinforce an 'ethnic tribune appeal,'''[46] a position supported by voters within the constitutional sphere, not through political violence. With the Provisional IRA ceasefires of the 1990s and eventual disbandment in 2005, Sinn Féin could ''reap the rewards of purportedly driving the best bargains possible for nationalists within a consociational power-sharing framework.''[47]

Eighteen years on from the GFA and perceptions of Catholic inequality amongst the nationalist community have not diminished; survey evidence suggests the contrary. When asked in 2010 about the levels of discrimination, 55.4% of nationalists identified the continued existence of prejudice against Catholics in Northern Ireland. By 2015, this had increased to 64.2%. As a result, political parties can continue to play on the perception of communal inequality in gaining electoral appeal; a position that continues to benefit Sinn Féin over their more moderate rival. In the 2015 election survey, 70.7% of Catholics were of the opinion that Sinn Féin had been ''the most effective voice for nationalists in Northern Ireland,'' whilst only 11.3% believing the SDLP had been more effective.[48] This is a rise by almost 10% for Sinn Féin since the 2010 general election.[49]

It is not inevitable that all ''ethnic tribune'' parties ''win'' from consociational power sharing.[50] Research from other post-conflict contexts argue that the degree of success in the long term depends on the ability of ethnic parties to simultaneously address grievances of their own ethnic groups and prove robust on issues by not

accepting concessions and identifying appropriate frames, strategies, and institutional opportunities, which involves moderating stances on issues that may be less salient to their group.[51] Ultimately, long-term success is compromised by "ethnic tribune" parties "unwilling to adapt and moderate their positions to the new political or institutional opportunities."[52] Embracing constitutionalism has made Sinn Féin susceptible to the pressures experienced by other modern political parties, bound by the laws of electoral competition and driven by office-seeking priorities.

Understanding politics in Northern Ireland purely on the basis of "ethnic outbidding" overlooks the extent to which these parties have modernised and moderated their agendas. Whilst Sinn Féin acknowledges traditional republican goals, they do so within modern democratic principles of justice, democracy, equality, and peace. Sinn Féin have adapted to the "rules of the game" and have been rewarded electorally for doing so. Therefore, it is also necessary to consider Sinn Féin within the framework of being a "normal" political party, subject to electoral logic and constitutional restraints.

"The Players": Sinn Féin as a "Normal" Political Party?

Much of the literature on post-conflict state building has focused more on the design of the game and enforcement of rules rather than the players themselves.[53] The ability of political parties to adapt and evolve is central to their survival. Sinn Féin has not been immune to the pressures, explaining the long-term evolution of many contemporary European political parties such as ideological adaptation, professionalisation, and the removal of unpopular linkages.[54]

There has been little attention on how Sinn Féin have adapted and modernised within the post-GFA context, an issue made particularly pertinent given past associations with the PIRA have provided the party "with an added dimension, unique among all mainstream political parties in Ireland, north or south of the border."[55] This section explores how the internal features and external political context interact to influence intra-party dynamics within Sinn Féin. By focusing on the removal of unpopular connections, party strategy, organisational structure (centralisation and intra-party authority), professionalisation, and support for more progressive politics (gay rights, gender equality), this analysis will consider to what extent Sinn Féin fits into the broader discussion of political party adaptation and modernisation.

Removal of Unpopular Linkages: Divorcing the Military From the Political

The transformation of a rebel organisation into a political party is a critical component of successful post-conflict peace and democratisation.[56] A key challenge facing a group that formally supported an armed campaign making the shift into constitutionalism is the necessary transformation of internal power configurations and the accompanying organisational restructuring. Organisational demands are very different when the purpose is military operations as compared to campaigning for elections.[57]

In many instances former combatants face the challenges presented to any new political party: devising a new political platform, raising campaign funds, creating a full-time and professional organization, and devising procedures to select leaders and candidates.[58] However, political parties with roots in, or connections to, armed revolutionary groups are not "new organisations"; they may have histories dating

back several decades to political parties, unions, and protest groups. Further still, they have an organizational legacy; this may be a loose coalition among disparate groups brought together by a mutual enemy or that of a tightly knit organisation.[59] Within a post-conflict context, a key challenge is the transformation of internal power configurations and the accompanying organizational restructuring.

The political success of Sinn Féin has relied on the party emancipating itself from its *alter ego* of many years, replacing revolutionary tactics for reform within the established political apparatus.[60] For many, the sum of Sinn Féin's transition has resulted in the party's ultimate objective of self-determination and territorial sovereignty being relegated to vague aspiration; replacing the "old teleological certainties of revolutionary struggle for the thirty-two county socialist republic with the deliberate ambiguity of an indefinite process."[61] The language of equality and pluralism replaced the rhetoric of Irish freedom and armed resistance.[62]

Whilst the political discourse of Sinn Féin has shifted, developments following the murder of Kevin McGuigan in 2015 suggest that the organisational structures of the movement have not evolved in line with the party's rhetoric. Investigations into McGuigan's death led to allegations by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) "that a line of inquiry in relation to the murder of Kevin McGuigan, involved members of the PIRA."[63] Subsequently, an independent report on paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland concluded in October 2015 that the PIRA and the paramilitary organisation's decision-making body, the Army Council, continue to oversee both the PIRA and Sinn Féin with an overarching strategy, albeit with "a wholly political focus."[64] Considering the PIRA were supposed to have decommissioned and "left the stage" in 2005, unionist parties demonstrated their unwillingness to engage politically with Sinn Féin by leaving the Northern Irish Executive. Such developments, which have highlighted the continued existence of paramilitary structures in Northern Ireland, have therefore been harmful to political progress, cooperation, and community relations, and raise many broader questions in relation to the structure, role, and purpose of paramilitary groups moving into a new era of post-conflict politics.

Events following the death of Kevin McGuigan may have formally recognised the continued links between Sinn Féin and the Provisional Army Council, yet the party itself is accused of maintaining an internal party culture and structure that is reflective of the organisation's revolutionary tradition. For some, the development of Sinn Féin from a clandestine and revolutionary movement has resulted in the party inheriting an "authoritarian political culture, both in terms of its internal organisation, and its relationship to the mainstream pro-system parties."[65] Even within the "supposedly more open and democratic politics of the peace process," it is argued that the internal politics of control exercised by the leadership has strengthened.[66]

The ability of political parties to adapt and respond to the changing political context is key to their survival. Such processes involve party restructuring, professionalisation, ideological adaptation, and the removal of unpopular linkages—in this case the PIRA. The removal of unpopular associations has been vital to the electoral success of Sinn Féin. Yet, the process of removing the PIRA and placing Sinn Féin's politics at centre stage has demanded internal party cohesion. The workings of Sinn Féin has led to comparisons between the party and "Stalin-esque" authoritarianism,[67] where a Soviet-style command structure positions a Big Brother-type figure at the top of the organisation.[68] Whilst the PIRA from the era of The Troubles is

far beyond recall, the continued existence of a command structure has enabled greater discipline and cohesion during the party's transition.

It is not necessarily just the internal politics and mechanisms of the party that are reflective of a revolutionary past; Sinn Féin have managed to retain a façade of an anti-system party. O'Malley proposes that such an anti-establishment position "might be attractive to the type of voter who in another country, with a different nationalist past, might support a radical right-wing party."[69] Sinn Féin retains features of an anti-establishment party by continuing to abstain from Westminster and refusing to recognise "Northern Ireland" in internal documents. Additionally, within the party's constitution, number one on the list of objectives is to "End British rule in Ireland."[70] Such positions are juxtaposed to party leaders shaking hands with members of the Royal Family and attending events hosted by the Head of State.

Adoption of a "Catch All" Strategy

It has been acknowledged within various post-civil war contexts that peace duration depends heavily on how former rebel groups decide to engage with the post-war political arena.[71] Furthermore, examining the electoral support base provides some insight as to whether these parties have reached out beyond the constituencies that supported them during the conflict. The establishment of broad-based, integrative parties that move beyond particular constituencies (geographic or otherwise) is crucial to the promotion of peace and democracy.[72] Therefore, whilst electoral progress is a key aspect of party adaptation, the adoption of a "catch all" strategy designed to attract a mass base of support for the party is also crucial.

An important aspect in determining how groups interact with the political process is how former rebel parties perform in electoral contests, particularly in the first election following the cessation of hostilities.[73] In the first assembly election after the GFA, the moderate nationalist and unionist parties, the SDLP and UUP, were rewarded for their facilitatory roles in the peace process by becoming the largest parties within their respective ethno-national blocs. However, Sinn Féin polled only 4% below the SDLP, signifying a positive electoral trajectory. By 2003, Sinn Féin became the dominant voice of Northern nationalism/republicanism. The party also emphasises its all-Ireland structure in facilitating the capture of 14 seats in the 2011 general election in the Republic of Ireland, the party's highest since 1923.[74]

Within modern liberal democracies, parties have been rewarded for moving towards the centre ground, away from ethnically based platforms. However, in Northern Ireland it seems as though the reverse has occurred, where more extreme parties (Sinn Féin and the DUP) have been the benefactors. Exploring other post-conflict contexts, Manning suggests that of particular importance to party strategy is whether the electoral appeals used during the conflict remain both available and effective in the "new" political arena.[75] Sinn Féin's electoral growth in Northern Ireland has not occurred by attracting protestant-unionist backing. In the 2011 assembly election, only 10% of unionists straddled the communal divide with a lower preference vote for a nationalist candidate, whilst only 20% of nationalist voters crossed to "enemy lines" with their lower preferences.[76] Ethno-national cleavages still dominate political preferences in Northern Ireland and show little sign of thawing.

Emphasising Sinn Féin's lack of cross-community electoral appeal ignores the moderation the party has gone through, the result being the broadening of support

amongst the nationalist community. Sinn Féin are traditionally perceived as a party of the Catholic working class, whilst the SDLP were dominant amongst the middle classes.[77] Research by Evans and Tonge identifies how Sinn Féin have been successful in attracting previous non-voters and new voters as well as middle-class nationalists who were happy to transfer their support to Sinn Féin to consolidate the party's constitutionalism.[78]

Sinn Féin have de-ghettoised to create broader appeal, the result being that "post-IRA republicans could—conceivably—enjoy not merely the rewards of prisoner release or northern police reform but, ultimately, the prospect of being in coalition government both in Belfast and Dublin."[79] Whilst the party's political strategy does not provide any guarantees of securing the ultimate goal of a united Ireland, the movement is nearer to this than it "had been getting through the use of violence."[80] A "catch all" strategy exists for Sinn Féin insofar as the party has broadened its appeal within the nationalist bloc, rather than widening their electoral support base in order to cut across the communal divide, a strategy that has been described as "catch-self" rather than "catch-all."[81]

Centralisation of Party Structure

The centralisation of power refers to "the location and distribution of effective decision-making authority within the party."[82] The general trend within a modernised party structure is to cede more power to members in a formal sense. Simultaneously however, parties become increasingly top down, with party members marginalised beyond formal voting rights.[83] Therefore, political parties have become more susceptible to leadership control.[84]

The structure and discipline of Sinn Féin has earned them the reputation of being "run of Bolshevik lines with a politburo type leadership enforced with army style discipline."[85] Such perspectives tend to emphasise the unwavering position of the party leadership. Adopting a more grassroots perspective, Maillot suggests that "Sinn Féin's greatest asset is undoubtedly the fact that it is first and foremost a party of activists," emphasising also a bottom-up aspect to decision-making structures and processes. However, at the same time the party is driven by a strong leadership relying on a "handful of personalities who seem to have the trust of the overwhelming majority of its members."[86] Therefore, leadership-driven or bottom-up processes are not necessarily mutually exclusive—an argument also expressed by Bean, who stresses that both "consent and coercion" define the relationship between Sinn Féin and the nationalist community.[87]

In terms of party structure, Sinn Féin is based on a decentralised network of Cumann (branches). Any changes to the party constitution and rules have to be voted on with a two-thirds majority at the party's annual conference (where all present party members have a vote).[88] However, it has been noted that disparity exists between formal structures and actual intra-organisational reality, due to "a combination of the work of the *Ard-Chomhairle* (National Executive), party loyalty and residual paramilitary links ensure that Sinn Féin is an organisation with a strong leadership authority."[89]

During the peace process, votes were taken on key strategic issues such as dropping abstention to the Republic (1986), the terms of GFA (1998), and support for policing (2007). Rather than being an exercise of intra-party democracy and grassroots consultation, such processes have been described as the management of

opposition as opposed to encouraging debate.[90] Also, Moloney suggests that the transition away from armed struggle from the 1980s onwards was very much a top-down process. The leadership figures of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were the key protagonists in constructing an electoral profile for Sinn Féin, selling the peace process to the grassroots as a "tactical ploy" to seek political gains rather than it being a long-term strategy.[91] Therefore, key to understanding centralisation within Sinn Féin is to explore the role and position of party leadership.

Intra-Party Authority

Intra-party democracy of a political organisation is reflective in the internal distribution of power. Criticism in recent years has been levelled at parties for being overly-hierarchical, particularly in relation to the role of the leadership.[92] In stressing the "presidentialization of politics," Poguntke and Webb argue that leaders have become more influential in nearly every aspect of party decision-making.[93] The choices made by parties in terms of how their leaders are recruited and removed is revealing of their democratic ethos.[94] It is therefore necessary to question, who selects the leader? How competitive are leadership contests? And how and when do leaders' terms come to an end?

In Sinn Féin, the party President is part of a 19 strong leadership team (Ard Chomhairle), which includes an officer board[95] and 12 other members, elected at the annual party conference (Ard Fheis).[96] Whilst there are no term limits in place for the Sinn Féin Presidency there are provisions for annual (re)election, as the officer board and members that make up the Ard Chomhairle are voted for at the party's Ard Fheis.[97] It is possible for any party member to contest the position of leader, providing they have the endorsement from one internal body. The annual re-election of party leadership and the provision for challenges to the President are both aspects that encourage membership inclusivity and leadership accountability.

The current Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, has been party President since 1983. Research on party leaders in several democratic states in the latter half of the twentieth century report a mean tenure of 75 months,[98] with only one in four able to boast a leadership of more than 10 years.[99] It is therefore extraordinary that the current President of Sinn Féin has remained in place for over three decades.

In understanding such longevity it is essential to firstly acknowledge the role of Adams in the peace process; replacing armed struggle with a political agenda was largely driven by the Northern leadership, with Adams at the helm. Therefore, the transformation and electoral success of the party is seen by many as Adams' legacy.[100] Adams' leading position has been bolstered during the peace process by the external recognition awarded to Adams by international figures such as President Clinton and Nelson Mandela. Clinton's decision to approve a visa to the U.S. in 1994 awarded Adams legitimacy as a credible political actor; a stark comparison with the UK government who continued to impose a broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin representatives until the end of 1994. In addition, a visiting ANC (African National Congress) delegation to Belfast in 1998 described Adams as an Irish Mandela and referred to the Sinn Féin leader as "Mr President."[101] Sharing a platform with the ANC gave the Sinn Féin leadership the opportunity to bask in some of Mandela's international adulation as a strong party leader

and a central figure to the South African peace process[102]—a comparison built upon by Sinn Féin within a post-peace process context. In May 2014, Adams was arrested and questioned in relation to the 1972 murder of Jean McConville. In front of a 20-foot mural of the Sinn Féin President in Belfast, protestors held posters with a photograph of Adams alongside Mandela and the statement, ''Defend the peace process: release Gerry Adams.''[103] Even during a period that had the potential to undermine any political leader's position, party supporters presented the peace process and Gerry Adams as synonymous.

Secondly, the Sinn Féin leader is elected as part of a wider leadership team. Throughout the peace process whilst Adams was party leader, it has been commented that Martin McGuinness was as much a figurehead.[104] Within post-GFA politics, McGuinness' position as Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland and Adams' as a TD in the Republic means they are *de facto* seen as the party leaders within the separate jurisdictions. It has been commented that the ''collective'' nature of such leadership is protective in nature, as it is difficult to isolate any one individual for criticism.[105] Sinn Féin has not been immune to internal tension. Whilst numerous splits within the republican movement occurred in the decades leading up to the peace process, this also meant that by 1998 intra-elite rivalry was minimised.

Thirdly, political parties change, re-organise, and modernize as a result of electoral defeat.[106] Such adaptation will often involve a change of leadership. With electoral growth and the comparative decline of their intra-ethnic bloc opposition, the SDLP, Sinn Féin has not experienced electoral defeat as a stimulus for change. Since the first Assembly election after the GFA, the SDLP have lost nearly 8% of their vote share whilst Sinn Féin's has increased by almost 9%.[107] In addition, the SDLP have had four different leaders since they were surpassed by Sinn Féin as the largest nationalist party in 2003. The electoral preference for Sinn Féin over their nationalist rivals is also reflected in public opinion of party leadership. In the 2015 Northern Ireland Election Survey, respondents were asked to rate all political leaders on a ten-point scale (0-low, 10-high). Amongst nationalists, 26.7% gave the former SDLP leader Alistair McDonnell a rating of 7 or more. The rating on the same scale for Martin McGuinness was over double that of McDonnell (54.2%), the highest assessment across the largest four party leaders within their respective ethno-national blocs.[108]

Whilst Sinn Féin's structure is likened to that of a revolutionary organisation, the hierarchy and leadership of other mainstream parties in Northern Ireland are also reflective of their history, formation, and organisational connections. For example, Moloney and Pollock have criticised the ''monolithic pattern of behaviour'' within the DUP, and likened the party to what exists in ''totalitarian regimes or military dictatorships.''[109] In terms of leadership, the DUP have been accused of reflecting religious associations in the party's organisation, mainly in their respect and admiration for a single leadership figure; ''both the Free Presbyterian Church and the DUP have turned out to be antitheses of democracy— institutions whose common characteristic is worship of and obedience to one man.''[110]

Like Sinn Féin, the DUP have also moderated their position. Strong leadership has been central to cohesion and electoral success as parties adapt to the post-conflict politics. Whilst Sinn Féin's party structure is critiqued for being ''cult-like'' and intolerant of internal debate, such characteristics are credited with maintaining party cohesion and minimising division.

Professionalisation and Party Strategy

Another element to consider is the professionalisation of party strategy and campaigning tools, including how the party selects prospective representatives. In addition, the ''professional electoral party'' relies heavily on media and public relations experts, pollsters, political advisors, and image consultants.[111] For some, the everyday organisation and political performance of Sinn Féin is the epitome of post-modern politics where the ''skilful manipulation of the media, the importance of personalities at local and national level, the constant redefinition of its core ideology and its increasingly post republican politics'' resembles Tony Blair's New Labour.[112] In terms of party image, Sinn Féin is able to tailor their political messaging for the separate jurisdictions. In the Republic, Sinn Féin are able to present themselves as offering something different and as the protectors against austerity; in the North the party continue to defend a minority Catholic community—a position summed up in Sinn Féin's Six County Report and Financial Statement:

> Throughout 2013 Sinn Féin continued to lead by example in the Executive in the north and as the main opposition party in the south. We worked to advance the peace process, continued to prioritise investment in job creation and set out real alternatives to the policies of austerity from Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, the Labour Party.[113]

Crucial to presenting an image of a united and cohesive party is selecting the right candidates. Sinn Féin is a well-regimented party where the rare dissenting voices have been marginalised.[114] Electoral politics requires a different set of skills than those demanded in wartime. The transition from military confrontation may change the sources of organisational power and authority in an attempt to professionalise the party. One clear example of this is the need to identify, recruit, and retain a large number of suitable candidates for public office, who are both competent and loyal to the organisation's cause.[115] Therefore, revolutionary groups adapt their organisational routines and modify recruiting procedures ''to carry out a revised set of vital organisational functions.''[116]

The way in which parties select candidates acts as an ''acid test'' of how democratic their internal affairs are.[117] Firstly, candidate selection is important in reflecting the type and quality of party representatives. Selection procedures are influential in determining the ''representativeness'' of minorities, particularly in relation to gender equality and ethnic minorities.[118] The more centralised candidate selection the better the prospects for greater minority representation. Secondly, selection methods also influence the nature of party discipline and loyalty. The more centralised and exclusive the process of selection, the more likely a candidate is to have greater loyalty to the party's ideological stance and policy direction.[119] Processes that are more democratic, inclusive, and localised are more likely to result in non-disciplined and individualistic candidates.[120] Therefore, party cohesiveness and parliamentary efficiency is much more likely with a centralised candidate selection process.

Sinn Féin carries out a multi-stage selection process for prospective candidates.[121] Any member, who has been in the party for at least 12 months, can put their names forward (although in exceptional circumstances Ard Chomhairle may

approve the election of probationary members). The responsibility for conducting elections lies at the local level with the relevant *Comhairle Cuige* (Regional Executive) where candidates are selected via secret ballot by full party members within the relevant constituency. Whilst it is the responsibility of the regional body to summon a selection convention, representing a localised selection process, the guidelines are subject to instruction from Ard Chomhairle. In addition, following selection by secret ballot, candidates have to be ratified by the national executive.[122] Sinn Féin candidates in all regional and parliamentary elections have to sign a pledge agreeing to be amenable to all directions and instructions issued by the national executive and agree to resign their seats if called upon by the majority of An Ard Chomhairle.[123] Sinn Féin is not an exception in having candidates make such pledges.[124] Candidates for the Westminster elections also agree to not sit in, or take part in, the proceedings of the Westminster parliament.[125]

Research by Matthews into the dynamics of candidate selection and gender representation highlights the willingness within Sinn Féin's central office to interfere with the selection process in order to address gender inequality.[126] Whilst central party control is used to encourage minority representation, the use of such measures also indicates a substantial degree of centralised involvement over candidate selection in comparison to rivals in Northern Ireland and other contemporary British and Irish parties.[127] In terms of intra-party democracy and power dynamics, "central interference suggests a high level of compliance or subservience amongst Sinn Féin members."[128]

A "New" Politics?

The main political cleavage in Northern Ireland remains based on ethno-national identity, meaning equality is primarily viewed as between communities, rather than alternative forms of identification such as gender, race, or sexuality.[129] Yet, viewing Sinn Féin as an "ethnic tribune party" emphasises the exploitation of ancient fault-lines above addressing new issue agendas. Whilst remaining intransigent on issues surrounding identity, Sinn Féin have been more reactive in relation to certain socio-political issues.

Sinn Féin has the most balanced gender representation in the Northern Irish Assembly and is the most pro-active in ensuring gender equality of Northern Ireland's main parties. Sinn Féin has also been supportive of LGBT rights, backing the referendum on the Marriage Bill (2015) in the Republic, allowing same sex couples equal marriage rights, and pushing for a similar campaign in Northern Ireland.[130] Asking Northern Irish voters in 2015 whether they supported the legalisation of gay marriage, Sinn Féin supporters were more likely to strongly agree/agree (77%) than any other party (SDLP, 60.7%).[131] Whilst more progressive on LGBT rights, issues such as the legalisation of abortion still remain contentious for the party and their support base.[132] There are certain policy perspectives where Sinn Féin is willing to follow public opinion (female representation, gay marriage), however shifts on other issues (reproductive rights) are unlikely to yield sufficient shifts in popular support.[133] It is not inevitable certain parties will "win" from consociational power-sharing. Whilst remaining robust on issues surrounding identity, Sinn Féin have recognised certain socio-political issues on which they can draw support. Sinn Féin therefore represents a responsive political movement rather than a party restricted by ancient fault-lines.

Conclusion

Whilst there is clearly no prescriptive framework of a "normal" political party, exploring ideological adaptation, party strategy, and intra-party democracy highlights how Sinn Féin have responded to the pressures of mainstream constitutional politics. The party has demonstrated an ability for statecraft, broadened their support base, professionalised, and shown governing competence. Whilst Sinn Féin have moderated and adapted their agenda considerably, remaining features of a revolutionary past such as central control and party discipline remain intact. The true extent of paramilitary command structures still in existence in Northern Ireland today have been undervalued and as a consequence had a negative impact on political cooperation in the region. Yet, it is unlikely that Sinn Féin would have been able to make such a profound transition from bullets to the ballot box without the intra-organisational structures that have delivered effective party management. Appreciating the history and roots of Sinn Féin as an auxiliary to the PIRA remains important to understanding the discipline and loyalty that remains within the party. Despite the GFA, joint membership of the PIRA and Sinn Féin remained a feature well into the twenty-first century, particularly at leadership level. Tight organisational structure instilled loyalty and discipline in the ranks of the PIRA and the same has gone for Sinn Féin in its loyalty to the party's leadership. Despite the existence of dissident groups who splintered from Sinn Féin's version of republicanism, such factions are small and demonstrate little challenge to the party's electoral prospects.

The centenary of the Easter Rising and devolved assembly elections in 2016 provide a contemporary demonstration of an enduring fault-line within Irish republicanism. Throughout the past century, Irish republicans have used the legacy of the Easter Rising, and the martyrs it created, to justify violence and self-sacrifice. One hundred years later, under the banner "Revolution 1916," Sinn Féin plan a range of national events to "remember and honour those who rose in rebellion but, more importantly, let us complete their work."[134] Whilst building on a revolutionary past, completing this "work" in the future will be down to Sinn Féin's tactics and strategy within the constitutional sphere.

Notes

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125. *Sinn Féin Bunreacht agus Rialacha*, Rule 10.1 (see note 1 above), 15–16.

126. Matthews (see note 118 above), 617–46. Sinn Féin are not the only Northern Irish party to adapt selection processes to encourage more female candidates. See, Jonathan Tonge, Maire Braniff, Thomas Hennessey, James W. McAuley, and Sophie A. Whiting, *The Democratic Unionist Party: From Protest to Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) for a discussion of the DUP's Central Executive involvement.

127. Jonathan Hopkin, "Bringing the Members Back In? Democratizing Candidate Selection in Britain and Spain," *Party Politics* 7, no. 3 (2001): 343–61; David Denver, "Britain: Centralized Parties with Decentralized Selection," in *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective: The Secret Garden of Politics*, edited by Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh (London: Sage, 1988).

128. Matthews (see note 118 above), 627.

129. Theresa O'Keefe, " 'Sometimes It Would Be Nice to Be a Man': Negotiating Gender Identities after the Good Friday Agreement," in *Everyday Life after the Irish Conflict: The Impact of Devolution and Cross-Border Co-operation*, edited by Cillian McGrattan and Elizabeth Meehan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 83–97.

130. Sinn Féin, "Equality, Diversity, Solidarity Strategy," http://www.sinnFéin.ie/files/2014/LGBT_Document_June2014.pdf (accessed July 22, 2015; 2014).

131. 2015 General Election Survey in Northern Ireland: ESRC Survey data.

132. At the 2014 Ard Fheis, the party voted to support abortion in limited cases (foetal abnormality) but did not go as far as pro-choice position.

133. For a discussion on religion and politics in liberal democracies from a public policy perspective see Michael Minkenberg, "Religion and Public Policy: Institutional, Cultural and Political Impact on the Shaping of Abortion Policies in Western Democracies," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 2 (2002): 221–47.

134. *An Phoblacht*, "1916 Centenary Programme of Events Launched," March 2, 2015.