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# Rally around the EU flag: Irish party positions on the EU in the wake of Brexit

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## Abstract

When national interests are threatened by an international political crisis, there is often a 'rally around the flag' effect among both the public and the political elite, interpreted as a patriotic response to an external threat. Brexit represented a significant threat both to the Irish economy and to the constitutional settlement on the island of Ireland. In contrast to other international crises that have been studied in relation to the rally effect, a supranational body (the EU) was acting on behalf of the threatened state (Ireland) in the negotiations. This paper examines how Brexit affected Irish party positions on EU affairs in the Republic of Ireland and asks if there was a 'rally around the EU flag' at the elite level. Using automated content analysis of parliamentary debates in Ireland between 2014-2019, the results show that there was indeed a significant and sustained pro-EU rally among most Irish parties. The findings also show that the rally effect differs depending on whether the party has a nationalist or internationalist orientation.

## Introduction

In his victory speech on the morning after the 2016 Brexit referendum, UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage predicted that the result would prompt other countries to follow the UK out of the EU:

“The other big effect of this election is not what’s happened in Britain, but what will happen in the rest of Europe... An opinion poll in the Netherlands said that a majority there now want to leave, so we may well be close perhaps to Nextit. Similarly in Denmark a majority there are in favour of leaving so we could be quite close to Dexit. And I’m told the same may apply to Sweden and perhaps Austria and perhaps even Italy too. The EU is failing, the EU is dying, I hope that we’ve knocked the first brick out of the wall.”

However, Brexit appears to have had the opposite effect, leading to an increase in support for the EU among voters in many other member states<sup>1</sup>. This is true particularly of Ireland, which (apart from the UK itself) is the country most directly affected by Brexit. Eurobarometer surveys found that the percentage of Irish citizens who felt attached to the EU increased from 51% in November 2015 to 57% a year later; and further increased to 67% by May 2019<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, an annual survey measuring support for EU membership in Ireland found a steady increase since Brexit, with a record 93% of the population in favour of continued membership in 2019 (European Movement Ireland 2019). The same survey found that the majority of respondents (58%) agreed that Brexit improved their opinion of the EU<sup>3</sup>.

One interpretation of this trend is that the public in EU member states saw how difficult and messy Brexit turned out to be, causing people who wanted their country to leave to think again. But this is at best a partial explanation: it may explain why people changed their minds about wanting to leave, but it does not account for the increase in positive attitudes towards the EU. An alternative explanation is found in the well-known phenomenon known as the ‘rally around the flag’ effect: when national interests are threatened in an international crisis, support for the executive tends to increase (Mueller 1970; Brody 1991). While this phenomenon has previously only been observed in relation to national governments, it is also possible that it applies in relation to supranational bodies such as the EU. Brexit began as an internal UK issue and quickly transformed into an international crisis that pitted the UK against the EU in acrimonious negotiations that lasted several years. Countries like Ireland, where vital national interests were threatened, looked to the EU to protect their interests in these negotiations.

Evidence from opinion polls is consistent with this interpretation. Not only did Irish voters’ opinion of the EU in general improve after Brexit, but more specifically attitudes towards the European Commission, which led the Brexit negotiations, changed significantly. The percentage of Irish respondents who said that they trusted the European Commission increased from 40% in November 2015 to 51% in November 2016, and peaked at 61% in March 2018<sup>4</sup>. This peak came shortly after the Northern Ireland ‘backstop’ was agreed between the EU and the UK. This agreement stated that in the absence of an alternative solution, Northern Ireland would maintain regulatory alignment with the EU and remain within the EU customs union, thereby ensuring that there would be no hard border in Ireland. It was a clear demonstration that the EU was standing up for Irish interests in the negotiations.

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of EU citizens who held a positive view of the EU stood at 34% in May 2016, and had risen to 40% by May 2017 and to 45% by May 2019 (Eurobarometer 85, 87 and 91).

<sup>2</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 84, 86 and 91. The corresponding figures for the EU as a whole are 49% (November 2015), 51% (November 2016) and 60% (June 2019).

<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of Irish public opinion on the EU in the wake of Brexit, see Simpson 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 84, 86 and 89.

A defining feature of the 'rally around the flag' phenomenon is that a broad consensus emerges among the political elite. A large body of research shows that an international crisis can lead opposition politicians to refrain from criticising the government. As Sigelman and Conover (1981: 303) put it, "it is a well-established principle that threats from outside a system promote cohesion within the system". Elite consensus limits the range of critical voices presented to the public via the media, and ultimately contributes to an increase in public approval for the government (Groeling and Baum 2008, p1066).

This paper will examine whether Brexit led to a reduction in criticisms of the EU and the adoption of more pro-EU positions by parties that were previously Eurosceptic. I argue that the EU institutions were viewed as championing Ireland's national interests during the most significant international crisis to face the country in decades. It therefore became difficult for politicians to voice criticisms of the EU, for fear of appearing to undermine the country's national interests. This was particularly true for nationalist politicians, who traditionally were among the most critical of European integration (Maillot 2009) but were now faced with a crisis in which Ireland's national interests depended on EU solidarity.

This represents an unusual and interesting case in which to examine the 'rally around the flag' effect, for two reasons. First, previous research has examined rallies as short-term phenomenon (see Baum 2002, p264), either because the events themselves were short-lived, or (in the case of military conflicts) because public and elite support typically wanes once casualties begin to mount (Mueller 1973; Gartner 2008). The Brexit negotiations lasted several years, making it an unusually lengthy diplomatic crisis. It therefore represents an opportunity to examine whether rallies can be sustained in the longer term. Second, and most significantly, it is a case where the defence of national interests that were threatened by the actions of another country was in the hands not just of the national government, but also a supranational body (the European Commission). This raises the question: when the EU acts to protect the interests of a member state in an international crisis, will it lead to a 'rally around the EU flag'?

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section I review existing research on the 'rally round the flag' effect, focusing in particular on the role of elite consensus, and develop hypotheses based on this. I then discuss Brexit from an Irish perspective, and explain why the crisis created the conditions for a pro-EU rally among a section of the Irish political elite that is traditionally critical of the EU. Next, I discuss the empirical strategy to test the hypotheses, which involves automated text analyses of speeches made in the Irish parliament between 2014 and 2019. The results show that debates on European affairs prior to the referendum on Brexit were characterised by a pro-/anti-EU division among the parties, but post-Brexit saw a significant reduction in the level of anti-EU sentiment expressed by politicians. This change is most apparent with respect to the nationalist party Sinn Féin, and least apparent in the case of the radical left Solidarity-People Before Profit alliance. The diverging patterns for these two parties are explored in greater detail based on a qualitative analysis of parliamentary speeches from the period. Finally, the wider implications of the findings are discussed in the conclusion.

### **Elite consensus during international crises**

The 'rally round the flag' effect is extremely well documented, particularly in the US context (see Baum and Potter 2008 for a review), but also in other countries (e.g. Lai and Reiter 2005). Going back to Mueller (1970), a number of authors have observed a tendency for presidential approval ratings to increase when the US is involved in a major international crisis. While most commonly associated with

military conflicts, a wide range of diplomatic and other non-military international crises have been found to produce this effect (Newman and Forcehimes 2010).

While early research on the topic focused on the link between international crises and public support for the government, more recent research has focused on the causal mechanism underlying this phenomenon, where the role of political elites is found to be critical. According to Groeling and Baum (2008, p1065), "The most widely accepted explanation for the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon is a relative absence of elite criticism during the initial stages of foreign crises". For example, Baker and Oneal (2001) find that public opinion rallies in the US only tend to occur when there is bipartisan support for the administration's policies. Relatedly, Berinsky (2007) finds that what shapes public support for military conflict is not the nature of the events (such as the number of casualties), but rather the positions of political elites. Opposition parties are motivated to support the government during an international crisis for a variety of reasons, including "patriotism and outrage at the threat to the country" (Brody and Shapiro 1989 p.355) and because signs of internal division could undermine the position of their government (Chowanietz 2011, p.676).

Given the centrality of elite consensus to the rally phenomenon, recent studies have begun to focus explicitly on the response of opposition political elites to international crises. Most notably, Chowanietz (2011) applies the concept of rallies around the flag to explain the response of political elites to acts of terror in a range of Western countries. He finds a very significant reduction in the incidence of opposition elites criticising the government in the wake of a terrorist attack.

While previous research has focused on rallies behind the national government, a similar effect could occur in support of supranational bodies (such as the EU) that act on behalf of their members in an international crisis. For instance, on issues such as trade, it is the European Commission rather than national governments that act on behalf of EU member states. If the EU is seen by the domestic political elite (i.e. political parties and members of parliament) as the main champion of the country's interests in an international crisis, then criticism of the EU could be characterised as weakening its negotiating position and undermining the national interest. This suggests the following hypothesis: *when the EU represents a member state's interests in an international crisis, domestic political elites will refrain from criticising the EU (H1)*. This paper will test this hypothesis in the context of the Brexit crisis in Ireland.

Of course, the rally effect might not apply equally to all parties. Chowanietz (2011, p674) argues that we should only expect a rally to occur amongst mainstream political elites, not "radicals and fringe elites" who will tend to criticise the political establishment regardless of circumstances. This qualification could be particularly significant when it comes to a pro-EU rally, because in most countries the pro-/anti-EU divide maps almost perfectly onto the distinction between mainstream and fringe parties (Taggart 1998). If a pro-EU rally was associated only with mainstream parties who already tend to support the EU, the effect would be negligible.

However, I argue that this distinction between mainstream and fringe parties is too crude when we consider the causal mechanisms believed to underpin the rally effect. As discussed above, elite rallies occur because parties want to appear patriotic and want to avoid undermining the country's position. Appeals to patriotism and the national interest will resonate not only with mainstream parties, but also with some fringe parties. For example, nationalism is a defining feature of radical right parties, who claim to be patriotic defenders of their country's interests (Golder 2016). The same applies to left-wing nationalist parties, of which Ireland's Sinn Féin is a good example. In contrast, one of the defining features of the radical left is that they are internationalist in orientation, focusing on the international dimension to the class struggle and solidarity among people across borders (March and

Mudde 2005). Evidence for this is provided by Gomez (2015), who shows that internationalism is a distinguishing feature of radical left parties' manifestos in Europe. Defending the national interest is therefore a less of an imperative for these parties. This leads to the second hypothesis: *the elite 'rally around the flag' will be weakest in the case of radical left-wing parties (H2).*

### **Brexit and the conditions for a “rally around the flag” effect in Ireland**

Mueller (1970) argued that for an incident to produce a rally, it must have the following three characteristics: it must be international in nature (domestic crises typically have the opposite effect, creating an increase in division among the political elite and public); it must be “specific, dramatic, and sharply focused”; and it must involve the country and government directly.

From the Irish perspective, Brexit ticks all of these boxes. First, it is an international, externally created crisis, in which Ireland's interests were directly threatened by the actions of a foreign government. Second, Brexit was a sudden and unexpected event with serious consequences for Ireland, both economically and politically. As the Taoiseach (Irish prime minister) put it, “Brexit...could have far-reaching impacts on nearly all aspects of national life” (Department of the Taoiseach 2017). According to the deputy governor of the Irish Central Bank, Brexit could be one of the most significant events to affect the Irish economy in a generation (Burke 2018). A government report predicted that a no-deal Brexit would lead to a 7% drop in GDP in Ireland, while the Irish Central Bank predicted food shortages in the short term and the loss of more than 100,000 jobs in the medium term (Copenhagen Economics 2018; Taylor 2019). Even more significantly, Brexit created the prospect of a return of a hard border on the island of Ireland, thereby threatening the fragile peace that has reigned in Northern Ireland since the 1998 Belfast Agreement (see Murphy 2019 for a discussion of the economic, political and constitutional implications of Brexit for Ireland).

In relation to the third characteristic identified by Mueller, Irish concerns dominated the Brexit negotiations throughout. However, it is different from other rally events that have been studied previously in that the national government was not the chief protagonist defending the country's interests. Rather, the negotiations were conducted on behalf of EU member states by a team appointed by the European Commission, led by Michel Barnier, with representatives from the other EU institutions. This point was repeatedly stressed by the Irish government. For example, the Irish European Affairs minister Helen McEntee said: “What we can't do and what we won't do, because we have not throughout this entire process, is engage in any kind of bilateral negotiations...This is a negotiation between the EU and the UK” (RTE 2019).

Ireland's very real concerns regarding Brexit, in particular the desire to avoid a hard border in Ireland, were to the forefront of the EU's negotiating stance. The president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, made this clear when he said “if the UK's offer is unacceptable for Ireland, it will also be unacceptable for the EU”, and summarised the EU's priorities in the negotiations as “people, money, Ireland” (European Council, 2017; Staunton and Leahy 2017). Irish concerns were explicitly incorporated into the EU's negotiating guidelines, published in April 2017 (one month after the UK formally notified the EU of its intention to leave). The guidelines included all of the Irish government's main concerns: avoiding a hard border in Ireland, protecting the Good Friday Agreement, and recognising existing bilateral agreements (such as the common travel area) between Ireland and the UK. The incorporation of Irish concerns in the EU's negotiating position followed months of lobbying by the Irish government, who succeeded in overcoming initial reluctance among some EU officials about giving such prominence to the Irish question (Connelly p297). Irish national interests were

therefore being defended in this crisis not only by the Irish government, but also (and most directly) by the EU institutions. For these reasons, Brexit created the conditions for not only a pro-government rally in Ireland, but also a pro-EU rally.

While this paper will focus on the question of whether or not a pro-EU rally occurred, it is quite evident that Brexit produced a pro-government rally among the political elite and the media in Ireland. The Irish government's approach throughout the Brexit process prioritised the avoidance of a hard border in Ireland. Once the backstop solution was agreed between the EU and UK government in December 2017, the Irish government's primary focus was on ensuring that this agreement was upheld. This was arguably a high-risk policy, particularly after it became clear that there was no majority in the UK House of Commons for a deal that included the backstop. By insisting on the backstop, the Irish government arguably increased the risk of a no-deal exit, which would be the worst possible outcome for Ireland. Despite this, there was hardly any criticism of the Irish government's position from members of the opposition or the media. As one columnist in an Irish national newspaper put it, "These costs and risks have been largely ignored in discourse mainly, it seems, because of a soft nationalistic sense of rallying against 'the old enemy'" (O'Brien 2019). Those who questioned the government's position were at risk of being labelled as unpatriotic. As one newspaper columnist in wrote, "a real patriot would put aside any reservations about the Irish government insisting on the backstop, and dig in with the rest of us" (Carey 2019).

The absence of opposition criticism of government policy was highly unusual for a country where a government-opposition dynamic normally dominates policy debates (Lauderdale and Herzog 2016). The consensus can be partially attributed to the fact that government actively sought to keep the opposition parties on board during the process. For instance, the government convened a regular 'Brexit Stakeholders Forum' throughout the period, which included members of the opposition, government departments, and industry representatives. The Forum ensured that opposition parties were kept informed on the progress of the negotiations and the government's strategy. However, there was also a desire among opposition politicians to show a united front in support of the Irish government and against the external foe (the UK government).

This is illustrated by an incident in which one opposition politician (Timmy Dooley of Fianna Fáil) broke ranks and blamed an impasse in the negotiations on the Irish government (see Kelly 2019). This provoked a furious reaction from within his own party. The party leader publicly criticised the comments and insisted that the blame lay entirely with the UK government rather than the Irish government. Nor was the criticism of Dooley limited to Fianna Fáil, which was after all in a confidence-and-supply arrangement with the government. Other opposition parties, including Labour and Sinn Féin, also criticised the comments on the grounds that they played into the hands of the British. As one Sinn Féin parliamentarian put it, "Giving succour to Boris Johnson and the hard right and staunch Brexiteers in the Tory party is hardly acting in Ireland's interest" (Kelly 2019).

All of this illustrates how a pro-government rally characterised the response of the political elite and media in Ireland to Brexit, motivated by a desire to appear patriotic and to avoid undermining the government's position. The remainder of this paper will focus on whether or not a pro-EU rally is also apparent in the discourse of the Irish political elite.

## **Research Design**

### ***Case Selection***

As stated, this research aims to test whether the Brexit crisis brought about a reduction in the level of anti-EU sentiment expressed by Irish political elites. I focus on contributions made by TDs (members of the Dáil, the Irish lower house of parliament) during debates on EU issues between January 2014 and October 2019. Contributions to parliamentary debates are the most appropriate source of information on party positions for the purposes of this study. Other commonly used sources of information on party positions, such as election manifestos and surveys of voters or experts (see Laver 2014 for a review) offer a snapshot of party positions at a particular point in time, but do not provide a means to examine the evolution of party positions over a relatively short timeframe. All debates relating to regular European Council summits during this period were selected for analysis. European Council summits are the most important dates in the annual EU calendar. During Dáil debates on these summits, party leaders and/or European affairs spokespersons express their views on the most important EU issues of the day. Selecting debates on European Council summits ensures that parties' general positions on the EU – rather than just their positions on Brexit - are captured. If a party was critical of the EU during this period, we should expect to find evidence of this in these debates.

There are four regular European Council summits each year, held in March, June, October and December. Usually two Dáil debates are held in relation to each summit, one before and one after the meeting. For the purposes of the analysis here, the pre- and post-summit debates are treated together. This gives a total of 23 quarterly time-points over the selected period on which to measure the EU positions of the parties. Contributions to these debates made by all TDs from the main political parties are examined (except for contributions of the Taoiseach, which are excluded because they are primarily procedural rather than substantive contributions<sup>5</sup>). The parties examined are Fine Gael (the senior government party throughout the period), Fianna Fáil (the largest opposition party throughout the period), the Labour Party (in government until early 2016, thereafter in opposition), Sinn Féin, Solidarity-People Before Profit Alliance, and the Green Party (all opposition parties). The Social Democrats, a small party formed in 2016, are excluded from the analysis as they only contributed five speeches in total to the selected debates. Independent TDs are also excluded as there is not enough consistency in terms of which Independent TDs contribute to the debates, making over-time comparisons difficult. Using these criteria, a total of 299 individual speeches are selected for analysis.

The period 2014-2019 covers a reasonably long period both before and after the Brexit vote. Ireland exited the EU/IMF 'bailout' programme in December 2013, and the period from January 2014 up to the Brexit vote in June 2016 represents a relatively normal (non-crisis) period, from which it is possible to identify the typical inter-party patterns in EU debates. These pre-Brexit patterns are compared with the post-Brexit period, from June 2016 up to October 2019, when the withdrawal agreement between the EU and Boris Johnson's UK government was reached. The selected period covers one change in government. A Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition government was in power between 2011 and 2016. Following the 2016 election, Fine Gael formed a minority government with a group of independent members of parliament, supported by a confidence-and-supply arrangement with Fianna Fáil. The period also saw a change in the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), although this change did not coincide with the election: Enda Kenny led the government until June 2017, when he was replaced by his Fine Gael colleague Leo Varadkar.

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<sup>5</sup> The Taoiseach's contributions to these debates involve detailed descriptions of the agenda of each European Council summit (in the case of pre-summit debates) or descriptions of the main decisions made (in the case of the post-summit debates). They are therefore of limited use when measuring party positions on EU issues. This is consistent with the recommendations in the literature on measuring political positions from parliamentary debates, which stresses the importance of isolating procedural contributions from substantive debates (e.g. Lauderdale and Herzog 2016, p376; Grimmer and Steward 2013, p294).

Of the parties examined, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour and the Green Party are solidly pro-EU (Benoit 2009, Gilland 2008). This was not always the case for the Green Party, but between the 1980s and early 2000s its position ‘moved from Euroscepticism towards neutrality and eventually strong support’ (Bolleyer and Panke 2009, p550). In contrast, Sinn Féin and Solidarity-People Before Profit are generally categorised as Eurosceptic (e.g. Hobolt and De Vries 2016), so are particularly relevant for testing the hypotheses.

Solidarity-People Before Profit is an alliance of two socialist parties, Solidarity (formerly known as the Anti-Austerity Alliance) and People Before Profit, who share speaking time in the Dáil<sup>6</sup>. Solidarity-People Before Profit (hereafter People Before Profit) was a relatively small force in the Dáil during the period analysed, holding four seats out of 166 up to the 2016 election, rising to six seats out of 158 thereafter. It is a hard Eurosceptic group that views the European Union as imperialist, militaristic and an enemy of the working class<sup>7</sup>, and it voiced its support for the left-wing campaign for Brexit in the UK (Kelly 2019; Newstalk 2016).

Sinn Féin is a much larger party, which held 14 seats during the initial period covered here (2014-2016), rising to 23 seats following the 2016 election. Sinn Féin’s position on the EU/EEC has evolved from outright opposition in the 1970s and 1980s to what it describes as ‘critical engagement’ from the 1990s onwards (Maillot 2009). Critical engagement entails that the party opposes many aspects of the EU as currently constructed and seeks to reform the EU from the inside. This position leads most recent observers to categorise Sinn Féin as a soft Eurosceptic party (e.g. Hobolt and De Vries 2016, p511), although previously the party had often been considered to be hard Eurosceptic (e.g. Giland 2008, p131) (for a discussion of the distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism, see Taggart and Szczerbiak 2008). The party is critical of what it describes as the EU’s neoliberal economic policies; it sees European integration as a threat to national sovereignty, and in particular a threat to Irish neutrality; and it claims the EU is insufficiently democratic (Frampton 2005, p238). Eurosceptic rhetoric was still very much in evidence from Sinn Féin at the outset of the period analysed here. For example, the party’s manifesto at the 2014 European Parliament election declared: “It is time to call a halt to the failed policies of the Brussels consensus... It is time to end the Brussels power grab, to rein in the Commission and return powers to the member states”. Unlike People Before Profit, however, Sinn Féin was opposed to Brexit from the start, primarily on the grounds that it could lead to a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (McCann and Hainsworth 2017, p328).

While People Before Profit and Sinn Féin are united by their left-wing economic policies and their Euroscepticism, they differ in one critical respect: Sinn Féin is a nationalist party (indeed, this is perhaps the defining characteristic of the party (O’Malley 2008)); while People Before Profit is explicitly internationalist, concerned with international solidarity among workers. This key difference leads to contrasting expectations in terms of the ‘rally around the flag’ effect, in line with the second hypothesis above. Sinn Féin, concerned with defending national interests, is expected to rally behind the EU in the crisis; while we should observe less of an impact when it comes to People Before Profit.

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<sup>6</sup> Solidarity-People Before Profit maintain separate organisations, but are registered as a single entity in the official registry of political parties. Since 2019 there has been a further organisational split with the formation of a third group, called RISE, under the Solidarity-People Before Profit umbrella.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Anti-Austerity Alliance’s 2016 manifesto stated that ‘We oppose capitalist institutions such as the EU, IMF and World Bank’.

## **Measurement**

An automated content analysis technique called Wordfish is used to compare the positions of parties on EU affairs over time. Wordfish is a scaling method that estimates policy positions on a single dimension. It is commonly used not only to estimate the position of different political actors, but also to study changes in policy positions over time, under the assumption that the meaning of words remains constant (e.g. Slapin and Proksch 2008; Proksch and Slapin 2009; Ceron 2015). It compares political texts (in this case, speeches), based on the relatively frequency with which each word is used. Words that discriminate between different political texts (i.e. used frequently in some texts but infrequently in others) are given greater weight when estimating positions. Because this technique reduces differences between texts to a single dimension, it is important that the texts selected for analysis all relate to the dimension of interest. In this case, all of the speeches relate explicitly to EU affairs.

The selected speeches were pre-processed to make them suitable for the Wordfish analysis. First, speeches by members of the same party in relation to a particular EU summit were combined, thus eliminating overly short texts that could produce unreliable results. The 299 individual speeches were in this way reduced to a total of 121 separate documents, each representing a party's contribution to debates on a particular European summit. Four parties (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, People Before Profit) contributed to debates on all of the selected summits, while the remaining two parties (Green Party and Labour) contributed to the majority of these debates.

Next, 'stop words' (i.e. extremely common words) were removed, and words were stemmed (i.e. the ends were removed) and changed to lowercase so as to reduce the number of unique words<sup>8</sup>. As suggested by Slapin and Proksch (2008, p713), words that were used very infrequently were also removed<sup>9</sup>. The documents were then transformed into a word-count matrix, where each row is a unique word and each column is a party at a particular time-point. The final word-count matrix includes a total of 3067 unique words across the 121 documents.

## **Results**

### ***Wordfish estimates***

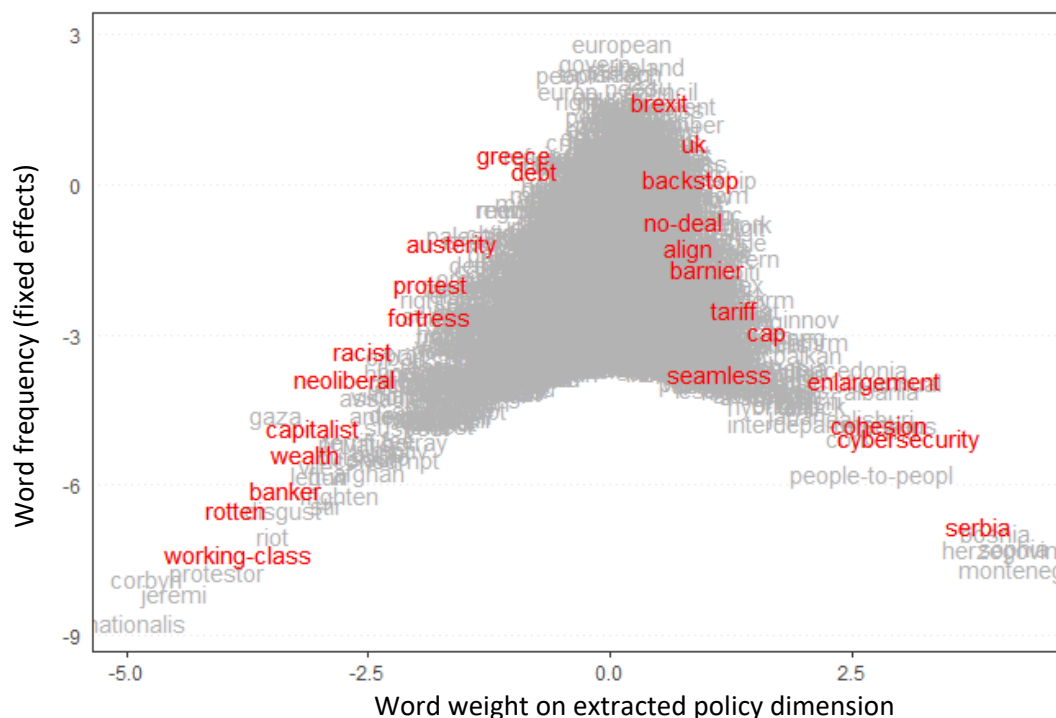
As mentioned, Wordfish estimates the position of texts along a single dimension. Before turning to these estimates, it is important to examine what the dimension actually represents. This can be done by inspecting the words associated with either end of the dimension, shown in Figure 1. Each word is assigned a weight capturing the importance of the word in discriminating between party positions, shown on the horizontal axis in Figure 1 (see Slapin and Proksch 2008, p709). Word fixed effects are shown on the vertical axis: high fixed effects mean that the word is used frequently; these words are less useful for distinguishing between documents, so generally tend to have weights close to zero. For instance, the word 'European' has a very high fixed effect and a word weight of zero, indicating that the word is used very frequently in contributions by all parties.

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<sup>8</sup> This was done using the *jfreq* programme (<http://conjugateprior.org/software/>).

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, words that are used in fewer than four separate party contributions are dropped.

**Figure 1:** Word frequency and word positions on extracted dimension



Certain words on either side of the extracted policy dimension are highlighted as examples in Figure 1. These have been selected to best illustrate the content of this policy dimension. On the left, words such as ‘bankers’, ‘corrupt’, ‘elite’, ‘capitalist’, ‘neoliberal’, ‘austerity’, ‘fortress’, and ‘debt’ confirm that this end the spectrum relates to left-wing critiques of the EU. On the right we find words relating to the regular policy agenda of the EU (such as ‘cohesion’, ‘CAP’, ‘cybersecurity’, ‘enlargement’ and ‘Serbia’ (one of the candidate countries for enlargement)), along with words relating to the Brexit negotiations (such as ‘Brexit’, ‘UK’, ‘Barnier’, ‘backstop’, ‘tariff’, ‘no-deal’, ‘align’ and ‘seamless’ (which refers to the Northern Ireland border)). This word pattern shows that the extracted dimension relates to the EU, with one side representing critiques of the EU and the other representing engagement with EU policy, including Brexit. It also shows that criticisms of the EU and discussions of Brexit tended not to occur together in the same contributions.

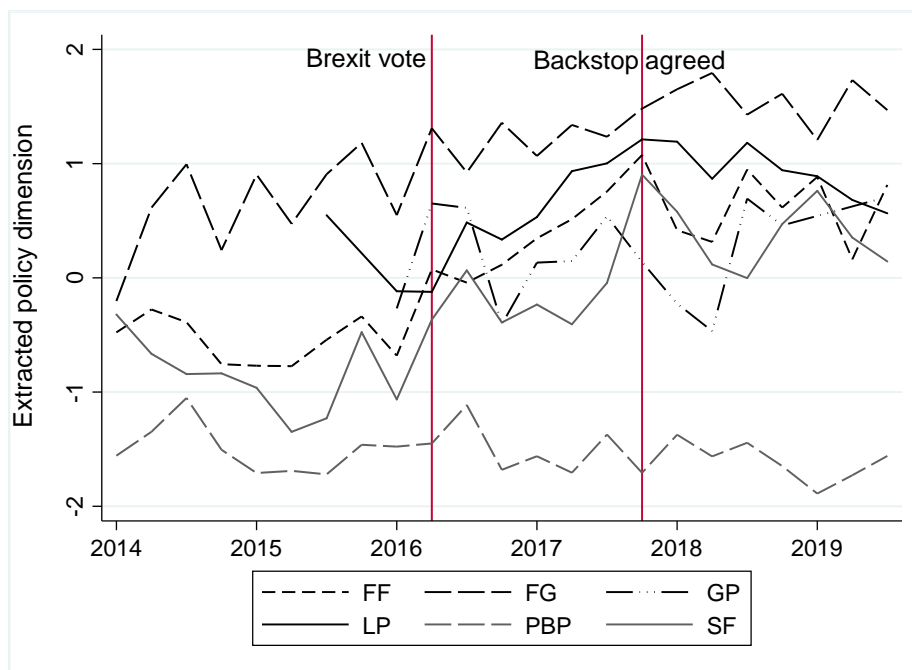
Turning to the party positions, Figure 2 plots the estimated position of each party on the extracted policy dimension over the period. Prior to Brexit, the parties are clearly differentiated. People Before Profit occupies one extreme on this dimension, followed by Sinn Féin; while Fianna Fáil, the Green Party, Labour and finally Fine Gael complete the ordering. The pre-Brexit positions extracted from the debates are consistent with what we know about the parties’ positions on the EU dimension at that time. This is illustrated in the left-hand panel of Figure 3, which compares the average position of the parties prior to Brexit on this Wordfish dimension with the general EU position of the parties as given by the 2014 Chapel Hill expert survey. There is a strong correlation between the two (Pearson’s  $R=0.90$ ), with the ordering of the parties almost identical in the two measures (the only exception being Fianna Fáil, which is towards the pro-EU end of the scale in the expert survey but is close to the centre of the party positions on the Wordfish dimension).

Figure 2 reveals a very distinct shift after the Brexit vote. With the exception of People Before Profit, the party positions extracted from the debates are generally much closer together post-Brexit, and

there is also a movement amongst most parties towards the pro-EU end of the scale<sup>10</sup>. This pattern is most clearly evident in the case of Sinn Féin (and to a lesser extent Fianna Fáil). Pre-Brexit, Sinn Féin is close to People Before Profit, while post-Brexit its position is much closer to the mainstream, pro-EU parties. The right-hand panel of Figure 3 confirms that the average position of Sinn Féin in the post-Brexit period, as estimated using Wordfish, is much more pro-EU than we would expect based on expert survey data from 2014.

As mentioned in the introduction, Brexit has been a very protracted crisis. Figure 2 shows that the effect of Brexit on Irish party positions did not diminish as time went on. On the contrary, the patterns described above become more pronounced over time. One likely reason for this is that, unlike many other international crises, there was a deadline for completion, and the salience of Brexit increased as the deadline drew closer. Furthermore, this deadline was extended on a number of occasions. Britain was originally due to leave the EU on March 29<sup>th</sup> 2019, which was later extended to October 31<sup>st</sup> 2019, and then to January 31<sup>st</sup> 2020. This means that for the latter part of the time-series, the Brexit deadline was always just around the corner. The patterns shown in Figure 2 also highlight the importance of the backstop agreement in shaping Irish party responses to Brexit. The agreement coincided with the most significant shift in the position of Sinn Féin in particular. This supports the interpretation that Irish parties, especially nationalist parties, rallied behind the EU when it became clear that the EU was protecting Irish interests.

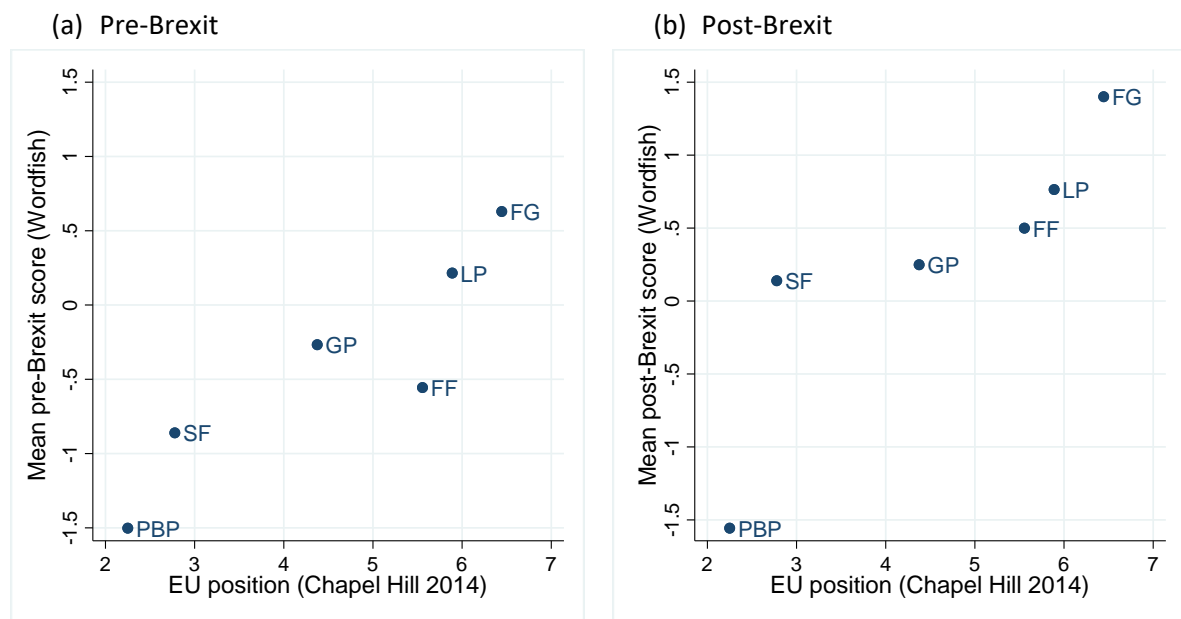
**Figure 2:** Wordfish estimates of party positions in Ireland on EU issues over time



Note: FF: Fianna Fáil; FG: Fine Gael; GP: Green Party; LP: Labour Party; PBP: People Before Profit; SF: Sinn Féin

<sup>10</sup> The Green Party shows a less consistent movement in this direction, as there is a high degree of variation in its position. However, this variation may be due to the fact that the estimates for the Green Party rely on a smaller number of speeches than the other parties.

**Figure 3:** Comparison of mean scores on Wordfish dimension with party positions from expert survey



Note: FF: Fianna Fáil; FG: Fine Gael; GP: Green Party; LP: Labour Party; PBP: People Before Profit; SF: Sinn Féin

To summarise the findings of the Wordfish analysis, what we see is that there is a division between Eurosceptic positions on one side, which are characterised by a left-wing critique of EU policies, while on the other end of the spectrum we find contributions that are preoccupied with Brexit, along with discussions of EU policies in other areas. Criticisms of the EU and discussions of Brexit do not tend to occur together in the same contributions. People Before Profit is located on the more Eurosceptic end of the spectrum throughout the period, while Sinn Féin adopted a broadly similar position during the pre-Brexit period. In the second half of the time-series, which represents the period after the Brexit referendum, the positions of most parties (with the exception of People Before Profit) move further away from the Eurosceptic end of the spectrum, as criticisms of the EU are aired much less frequently.

These findings are in line with the hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that the Brexit crisis would lead to a reduction in the level of criticism of the EU, which is what we observe, particularly in the case of Sinn Féin. The party could have discussed Brexit in a critical fashion, for example highlighting the failings of the EU that led to Brexit, or criticising the EU's approach to the negotiations; or it could have continued its criticisms of other perceived shortcomings of the EU (as People Before Profit did), but this is not what we find. As highlighted in the next section, Sinn Féin (along with most other parties) took the side of the Irish government and the EU negotiators against the UK government, and generally toned-down its EU-critical rhetoric. The second hypothesis was that this effect would apply less in the case of radical left parties, who are less concerned with appearing patriotic and defending the national interest. This is clearly supported, as the radical left People Before Profit party does not appear to have shifted its position at all during the period analysed.

### ***The diverging reactions of Eurosceptic parties to Brexit: illustrative examples***

The findings with respect to the hypotheses are shown most clearly by the diverging paths of the two Eurosceptic parties, Sinn Féin and People Before Profit, after Brexit. To illustrate these different

reactions more clearly, this section will highlight some examples from speeches made by each party in the Dáil during this period.

Prior to Brexit, Sinn Féin and People Before Profit regularly criticised the EU on a number of fronts: EU economic policy was attacked for protecting the interests of the wealthy; foreign policy for dealing with regimes that undermined human rights; defence policy for seeking to militarise the EU; and migration policy for creating a 'fortress Europe'. In addition, both parties regularly referred to the EU as elitist and undemocratic. Sinn Féin, as a nationalist party, also focused on how the EU undermines national sovereignty.

The following quotations from Sinn Féin parliamentarians during Dáil debates in the pre-Brexit period illustrate some of the party's main concerns:

"Sinn Féin voted against the Commission because we have serious concerns over its make-up. We regret that it is still suffering from a major democratic deficit and continues to have too much power over EU policy and member states." (Gerry Adams, October 2014).

"I commend the actions of Greece in upholding the principles of democracy in the face of increasing pressure from EU institutions which are holding the citizens of that country to ransom." (Gerry Adams, July 2016)

"It is another damning indictment of the EU's abject failures on the growing humanitarian and refugee crisis." (Séan Crowe, March 2016)

"[The European Council meeting] focused on completing the economic and monetary union, which will only further undermine the economic sovereignty of member states and try further to lock them into the disastrous economic and austerity models that have wreaked havoc on those on low and middle incomes across the EU." (Séan Crowe, March 2016)

People Before Profit representatives addressed a similar set of themes during this period, although they tended to express their views in stronger terms than Sinn Féin:

"The growing legitimacy crisis for the European Union results from ordinary citizens' perception of the Union as being undemocratic, corporate dominated and a honey pot for the political class to get exceedingly well-paid jobs to further their own careers, while ordinary people across Europe are getting hammered with costs and austerity and while democracy is being slowly eroded and undermined for ordinary citizens". (Richard Boyd Barrett, People Before Profit, July 2014).

"[The EU] is founded on the principles of debt slavery, dictatorship of the markets and the European Central Bank, denial of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of profit for the 1% above all." (Paul Murphy July 2015).

"There have been many low points for the European Union over the past few years, including the campaign of terror unleashed against the Greek people for daring to stand up to the troika's austerity, the fiscal treaty outlawing any policy other than Thatcherism, and the silent coups led by the European Central Bank against the Greek and Italian Governments, but ..they have now managed to go lower with this agreement with Turkey. To be blunt, it is an agreement to breach the basic human rights of some of the most vulnerable people in the world, namely, those fleeing Syria" (Paul Murphy, March 2016).

From June 2016 onwards, the attention of Sinn Féin shifted to Brexit, where its focus was on protecting Ireland's national interests, particularly the need to avoid the reintroduction of a border with Northern Ireland. In expressing these views, Sinn Féin representatives often indicated their support for the government and the EU institutions.

"We have consistently said that if the Government acts in the national interest, which means protecting all of the people of Ireland, then Sinn Féin will support it" (David Cullinane, December 2017)

“The issue of the Border requires a political solution, not one that is technical or electronic. That is recognised by the European Commission and the European Parliament...The solution lies in the entire island remaining in the customs union and the Single Market.” (Gerry Adams, October 2018)

“I wish to recognise and appreciate the work of Michel Barnier and his colleagues.... There is an onus on political leaders to do what is right to defend our country’s political and economic interests. That has guided us in Sinn Féin. We have supported the Government and the European negotiating team in their endeavours and attempt to get the best deal possible.” (Mary Lou McDonald, November 2018).

“I welcome the fact that agreement has been reached between the European institutions and Britain. I will reserve the well-deserved and effusive praise for Michel Barnier and others until the agreement is completely over the line and we have some certainty, but I commend Members on their efforts, including the Taoiseach, the Minister of State...and others for an exhausting and long journey” (Mary Lou McDonald, October 2019).

The response of People Before Profit to Brexit was strikingly different, in two ways. First, People Before Profit gave Brexit less attention in its speeches than any other party; instead, its members continued to focus on criticising the EU’s economic and foreign policies. The second difference was that People Before Profit, unlike all the other parties, refused to come out in support of the EU’s negotiating position on Brexit. Instead, when discussing Brexit the party focused on negative characterisations of the EU and the flaws in the EU that lead the people of Britain to vote to leave, and stressed that they are not concerned with the national interests but with the interests of the international working class.

“This is a Europe of war and imperialism. Every single day we see the impact of the neo-liberal nature of the European Union in this country. ...That is the European Union we are talking about. It is a racist, militarised, neo-liberal institution. That is the EU that working class people in Britain voted to leave.” (Paul Murphy, December 2017)

“Reference has been made to the national interest. We care about the interests of working-class people. ... The Tory Government and the EU top officialdom represent the interests of big business elites. Nobody in these negotiations represented the interests of working-class people. (Mick Barry, November 2018)

“(The) people, who will ultimately write the agreement, do not represent the interests of working-class people, Protestant or Catholic, North or South, rather, they represent the interests of big business. Neoliberalism has been written into these agreements from the outset” (Ruth Coppinger, October 2019)

It is important to stress that Sinn Féin did not cease all criticism of the EU during the Brexit period. It did on occasion make critical comments in relation to the themes that occupied it previously, such as foreign and defence policy and the power of the Commission. However, these issues occupied much less time in the party’s contributions to debates on the EU during this period. Instead, Sinn Féin focused on Brexit first and foremost, and did so in a way that was supportive of the EU in its role as the defender of Ireland’s interests in relations with a third country. In this way, the largest Eurosceptic party in parliament adapted its rhetoric on EU affairs in a way consistent with the ‘rally around the flag’ effect.

## **Conclusion**

A serious international crisis can dominate the domestic political agenda and lead to a temporary rally behind the government among the political elite and the general public. Brexit appears to have had this effect in Ireland, but as well as a pro-government rally there was also rally behind the EU, which was acting on behalf of member states in the crisis. This paper focused on the elite side of this rally, where it was shown that the biggest Eurosceptic party, Sinn Féin, largely suspended its criticisms of

the EU in order to get behind the national cause and the EU negotiators acting on behalf of the country. This elite rally was sustained throughout the lengthy period of the Brexit negotiations, leading to a significant disruption in the normal process of party competition on EU affairs. While not explicitly examined here, the elite consensus in support of the EU during the Brexit crisis is likely to have contributed to the rising levels of public support for the EU that occurred in Ireland over this period.

This is not to say that Sinn Féin reversed its position on specific EU policies. Rather, the findings show that when discussing EU issues, Sinn Féin's language changed significantly once the Brexit crisis took centre stage. The party's critical positions were pushed to the side and it adopted a more positive stance towards the EU. In light of the threat to Ireland posed by Brexit, most parties (including Sinn Féin) saw their role as standing up for Irish interests and supporting those who were acting on behalf of Ireland. Furthermore, the rally effect did not dissipate over time: rather, the effect that Brexit had on how parties discussed EU issues increased as the Brexit deadline approached, and was reinforced by key events in the negotiations such as the agreement on the Northern Ireland backstop.

An alternative interpretation of the shift in Sinn Féin's rhetoric on the EU is that the party was motivated by long-term strategic concerns rather than a desire to show unity during an international crisis. As we have seen, Sinn Féin has gradually softened its opposition to the EU since the 1990s, and the party may have seen Brexit as an opportunity to finally complete the transition to becoming a more pro-EU party, thus bringing it into line with public opinion in Ireland and opening up more opportunities in terms of forming a future coalition government. However, the evidence suggests that the 'rally around the flag' effect was at least partially responsible for the reduction in anti-EU sentiment expressed by Sinn Féin during the period examined. The biggest change in Sinn Féin's position is observed not in 2016, following the Brexit referendum, but in December 2017, when the Northern Ireland backstop was agreed between the EU and the UK. This shows that the party responded positively to the EU's actions in standing up for Ireland's interests, and this positive position was sustained over the remainder of the negotiating period.

Not all parties are equally susceptible to the 'rally around the flag' effect. Parties that do not emphasise national interests and national identity are less likely to feel compelled to support the government, or any other body acting on behalf of the country, in an international crisis. In particular, radical left-wing parties typically prioritise what they consider to be the interests of the international working class rather than national interests. In Ireland, the Solidarity-People Before Profit alliance did not join the pro-government and pro-EU rally that characterised the response of other parties to Brexit.

The finding that the 'rally around the flag' effect can occur in support of supranational as well as national executive bodies has significant implications beyond the specific case analysed here. As EU competence in areas such as foreign and defence policy grows, occasions where member states will look to the EU to defend their national interests are likely to occur more frequently. If the EU is engaged in a diplomatic crisis with an external power in the future, we can expect that many domestic elites in countries whose interests are at stake will rally behind the EU, and public support will follow. Further research should investigate this in relation to future international crises where the EU plays a prominent role. As Lijphart (1996, p263) observed, "external dangers promote internal unity", and this can hold true for regional organisations like the EU as well as nation states.

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