

Assessing the Causes and Future Implications of Recent Sinn Féin Political Victories

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Introduction:

In recent years, Sinn Féin has seen a surge in political support in Northern Ireland. In 2022, the party achieved its first-ever plurality at Stormont, winning 29% of the vote and electing the first Sinn Féin First Minister, Michelle O'Neill (BBC, 2022). Not only has the party achieved a plurality over Unionist parties, but it has established itself as the dominant Nationalist, pro-reunification party in Northern Ireland, winning 72.9% of the nationalist vote in 2022 compared to the SDLP's 22.8% (Ladow and McBride, 2024). This unprecedented rise in support has granted Sinn Féin a newfound window for liberal domestic policies and brought the question of Irish reunification closer to the forefront of political discussion.

Although all official Nationalist parties have declared support for reunification, Sinn Féin is unique in declaring reunification as their primary goal for ideological purposes and to resolve certain domestic issues. The Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) has traditionally represented more conservative Catholics who prioritize domestic issues over reunification. In 2020, SDLP representatives voted with Unionists to oppose abortion protection laws (Ó Dochartaigh, 2021). These actions demonstrate that other Nationalist parties, such as SDLP, prioritize domestic policy over the issue of reunification. Sinn Féin remains steadfast in their support for social-democratic policies and reunification, and has argued that reunification is the ideal way to accomplish domestic goals. Donegal MLA Pádraig Mac Lochlainn in particular mentioned reunification as a means to resolve Ireland's housing crisis.

Despite the party's stated goal of reunification by 2030, reunification would require a cross-border referendum (Hennessy, 2024). Based on results from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, pro-reunification attitudes would have to grow significantly on both sides of the border to be achievable. The percentage of Northern Irish favoring unification increased from 27% to 34% between 2022 and 2024. To confidently hold a referendum, however, Sinn Féin would need to control over 50% (Gordon, 2022).

Success also hinges on Sinn Féin's results in the Republic. Although 64% of the Irish favored reunification in 2024, Sinn Féin has had mixed results in recent elections (Leahy, 2025). In the meantime, Sinn Féin has promoted a liberal, social democratic domestic platform focused on housing, healthcare, and labor. Contrary to their stance on reunification, policy goals are quite flexible and have occasionally diverged between North and South. They can adapt based on the electoral situation, but maintain only one major objective of reunification for both ideological and policy purposes (Kelly, 2024). This approach raises the question as to whether recent support is driven primarily by support for reunification or domestic policies.

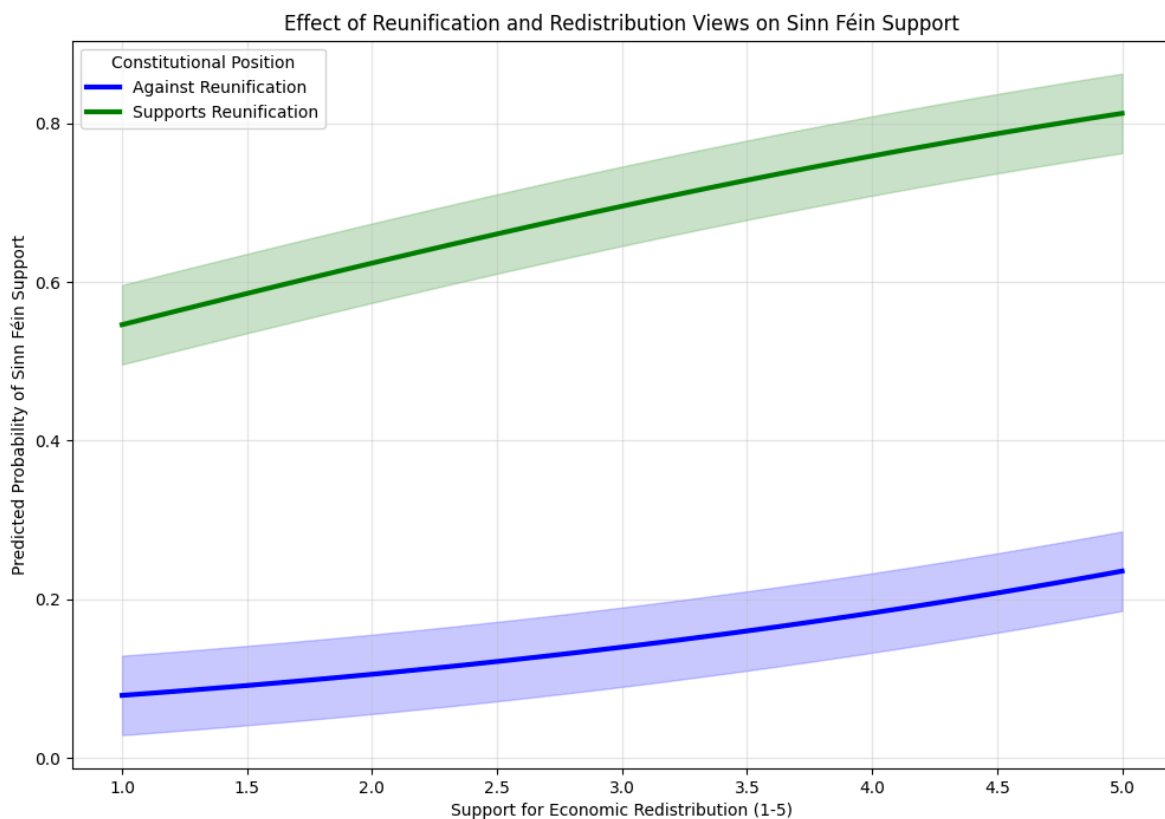
Our research aims to determine the primary cause of Sinn Féin's rise in support. The answer to this question will be critical in understanding the political mood in Northern Ireland and determining the direction of future Sinn Féin policy. If support is primarily driven by domestic policy preferences, the party's targets for reunification will likely be delayed. However, if Sinn Féin's support is primarily driven by desires for reunification, the party will be under increased pressure to deliver difficult promises. Based on the results of our analysis, we will attempt to determine the future course of Sinn Féin policy and the likelihood of success based on popular support.

Data and Modeling Approach:

To investigate which dimension is more important in explaining Sinn Féin’s recent electoral success, we analyzed weighted survey data comprising a representative sample of 1,148 respondents from Northern Ireland. The data was sourced from the Northern Ireland Life in Times 2023 survey. Each individual’s political party preference (whether they supported Sinn Féin) was modeled using logistic regression, a task commonly used to assess how various factors influence binary outcomes.

The hypothesis motivating our research was that Sinn Féin’s recent rise in Northern Ireland might be driven by one or both of two dimensions: support for Irish reunification and economic left-wing policies—redistribution. To test this, we included attitudinal measures for both in our model. The reunification variable captured whether a respondent supported the country joining the Republic of Ireland instead of maintaining the current arrangement or moving to devolved government. The redistribution variable was measured through agreement with the statement: “The government should reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes.” The redistribution variable was mean-centered ($M = 3.57$) for clarity of interpretation.

We also included basic demographic variables (age group, education, and income) to account for broader societal trends. Further, we created an interaction term between reunification and redistribution attitudes to test whether support in both domains created a distinct “left-nationalist” bloc driving support for Sinn Féin. If the interaction term were significant, we’d expect support for one issue to matter more when paired with support with the other. If not, the implication would be that each independently contributes to the likelihood of Sinn Féin support. See the appendix for a complete data dictionary.



Interpreting the Results:

The clearest and most valuable finding is the overwhelming role of Irish reunification attitudes in predicting support for Sinn Féin. The estimated coefficient is 2.65, which translates to an odds ratio of 14.09. Holding all else constant, a respondent who supports reunification is roughly **14 times more likely** to support Sinn Féin than someone who prefers devolution or the status quo. The 95% confidence interval ranges from about 9.31 to 21.4, and the p-value is very small ($p < 0.0001$), meaning we can be extremely confident this is not due to random variation. This variable alone fundamentally reshapes the likelihood of Sinn Féin affiliation.

Support for economic redistribution, our proxy for left-wing economics, plays a weaker but statistically significant role. Its coefficient is 0.321, with a p-value below 0.05 ($p = 0.012$). Respondents with stronger-than-average support for government-led economic redistribution are ~38% more likely to support Sinn Féin than those with weaker support, and we can be confident of this effect. While the effect size is modest, it still suggests that economic ideology remains a key part of the party's appeal.

Crucially, the interaction term between reunification and redistribution attitudes is not statistically significant (coefficient = -0.086; $p = 0.600$). This complicates our findings, indicating that the two significant dimensions contribute independently to the likelihood of Sinn Féin support. In other words, although residents who support these dimensions are more likely to support Sinn Féin, supporting both does not amplify the effect. Rather than being narrowly driven by a fused left-nationalist bloc, this finding clarifies that Sinn Féin's rise benefits from separate constituencies drawn to different aspects of the party's platform.

Turning to the demographics we captured, age was also a clear dividing line. Compared to our baseline group of 18-24-year-old respondents, older groups were generally less likely to support Sinn Féin. The 65+ category showed a strong and statistically significant effect (coefficient = -0.876; $p = 0.009$), and were 58% less likely to support Sinn Féin than the youngest cohort. This pattern reinforces the broadly observed generational divide in Northern Ireland and suggests that the party's support is anchored most firmly among younger voters.

Education also emerged as a meaningful factor (coefficient = -0.129, $p = 0.030$), suggesting that higher educational attainment is associated with a lower probability of Sinn Féin support. This effect is undoubtedly complicated by Northern Ireland's history of economic and educational ethnic segregation (Breen et al., 1999). Looking forward, this trend might suggest a potential tension between the party's base and more highly educated voters. Education, however, was not a center of our analysis, and its impact on political development in Northern Ireland should be considered in future studies.

Income effects were the most mixed. Compared to high-income respondents, those in the lowest-income group are nearly twice as likely to support Sinn Féin (coefficient = 0.683; $p = 0.007$). However, middle-income groups are not significantly different from the high-income baseline. The relationship between class and party support seems strongest at the lower end of the income spectrum, but this topic is also worth future study.

Interestingly, respondents with uncertain views on reunification are also significantly more likely to support Sinn Féin than those who oppose it outright (coefficient = 0.954; $p = 0.002$). This may reflect latent nationalist tendencies, dissatisfaction with the current arrangement, or uncertainty about how reunification might look. By contrast, uncertainty around redistribution shows no meaningful association with Sinn Féin support.

Overall, the model performs decently. The deviance statistic is close to the degrees of freedom, indicating no major signs of model misspecification. The model can explain about 24.5% of variation in deviance relative to a null model, indicating moderate explanatory power

and room for additional predictors in further study. More importantly, the predictive strength of the model rests on a few especially potent variables, providing a coherent and interpretable, if partial, explanation of Sinn Féin's recent support base.

Making Sense of the Findings:

Reunification sentiment is the gravitational center of Sinn Féin's current support base, but it's not the whole story. Support for redistribution also matters, and the two identities don't seem to amplify one another. Instead, Sinn Féin's base appears to be made up of two distinct, parallel groups: one energized by national identity, the other by redistributive economics.

The direction of Sinn Féin policy relative to these groups' preferences is therefore likely to determine the party's future success. The fact that support for reunification is the primary predictor of Sinn Féin support puts increased pressure on the party to deliver on their goals. If the party continues to gain seats in upcoming elections conversations about reunification will continue to become mainstream. These results suggest that the party will have to carefully tailor policy and messaging to continue support. They must remain committed to reunification to maintain their power base, but doing so also risks alienating supporters of left wing policy reluctant for reunification.

Because support for reunification and redistribution operate independently, the economic dimension represents a battlefield that both parties should contest to gain support in the coming years as a parallel avenue for persuasion. Sinn Féin can package redistribution as a growth engine for its left-wing economic platform. By arguing that a united Ireland unlocks new markets and investment, Sinn Féin could link redistribution promises to reunification governance, like a unified welfare system. Conversely, unionist parties like the DUP can frame reunification as a fiscal gamble and highlight the transition costs and implementation challenges involved. Without directly challenging the nationalist identity itself, this approach might gain some cause with younger voters worried about increased housing costs and the potential for an overburdened welfare system. Looking forward, the economic message accompanying reunification will be a central point of contest for stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

Also relevant is the concentration of Sinn Féin support among younger, pro-reunification respondents. Only the 65+ group lags significantly, implying a built-in demographic tailwind. As older, more skeptical voters gradually exit the electorate, they might be replaced by younger citizens whose default leanings are far more favorable to Sinn Féin. If current attitudes persist, reunification supporters could constitute a more stable majority in the medium term. Even without securing an outright majority in any single election, Sinn Féin's hold on a growing share of the electorate gives it strong leverage in potential future coalitions. Sinn Féin should continue to invest in leadership development, youth councils, and sustained outreach on campuses and digital platforms.

Data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) does still show a significant portion are opposed to reunification, but this could be due to either ideological or practical concerns. According to the 2023 NILT, only 68% of Catholics answered that they would vote "yes" on a reunification referendum (NILT, 2023). In order to achieve reunification, Sinn Féin will have to continue to build support from within, and possibly outside, the Catholic community. The farther away in time from the Good Friday Agreement, the more entrenched the partition becomes, increasing the logistical and practical hurdles to reunification.

Despite these obstacles, our results suggest that reunification may be more achievable than previously thought. If economic and social conditions further support for reunification, Sinn

Féin should expect to gain electorally. At the same time, they must continue to be flexible enough on domestic issues to avoid alienating supporters. Among Sinn Féin supporters primarily driven by domestic preferences, arguments such as Pádraig Mac Lochlainn's that reunification would resolve domestic issues is a promising strategy.

Sinn Féin's success stems from its ability to appeal simultaneously to voters motivated by Irish reunification and those drawn to its left-wing economic platform. Reunification sentiment remains by far the dominant predictor of Sinn Féin support, but the party's path forward is complicated by its commitments to economic change. Future success will depend not just on advancing the reunification agenda, but on navigating the tensions and tradeoffs between these distinct voter blocs. For political actors across Northern Ireland, these findings present an opportunity to craft messages that speak to complex, overlapping identities and highlight the importance of fostering a strong youth base.

Appendix:

Variable Name	Description	Type	Coding / Values
party	Indicator for whether respondent supports Sinn Féin	Binary	1 = Supports Sinn Féin; 0 = Other party
reunification_support	Level of support for Irish reunification	Binary	1 = Supports reunification; 0 = devolution or status quo
redistribution_centered	Mean-centered level of support for economic redistribution policies	Continuous	Higher values = greater support
education_score	Respondent's educational attainment score	Continuous	Higher values = more education
income_group_Upper Mid	Dummy variable indicating Upper-Middle income bracket	Binary	1 = Upper-Mid Income; 0 = Otherwise
income_group_Lower Mid	Dummy variable indicating Lower-Middle income bracket	Binary	1 = Lower-Mid Income; 0 = Otherwise
income_group_Low	Dummy variable indicating Low income bracket	Binary	1 = Low Income; 0 = Otherwise
RAGECAT_25-34	Dummy variable indicating respondent aged 25–34	Binary	1 = Age 25–34; 0 = Otherwise
RAGECAT_35-44	Dummy variable indicating respondent aged 35–44	Binary	1 = Age 35–44; 0 = Otherwise
RAGECAT_45-54	Dummy variable indicating respondent aged 45–54	Binary	1 = Age 45–54; 0 = Otherwise

RAGECAT_55-64	Dummy variable indicating respondent aged 55–64	Binary	1 = Age 55–64; 0 = Otherwise
RAGECAT_65+	Dummy variable indicating respondent aged 65 and older	Binary	1 = Age 65+; 0 = Otherwise
reunification_x_redistribution	Interaction term between reunification support and redistribution support	Continuous	Product of reunification × redistribution support

Additional Notes

- Reference categories (baseline groups):
- Income: Highest income group (above “Upper-Mid”)
- Age: 18–24 years old
- Continuous predictor education_score is treated as linear in the logistic regression.
- Interaction term captures whether holding strong reunification and redistribution views together has a combined effect beyond their individual influences (though it was not statistically significant in the results).

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