

Euroscepticism without politicisation: the case of Ireland during the financial crisis

Rory Costello

Abstract

Ireland has always had one of the highest levels of public support for the EU among member states. However, there was a sharp decline in support for and trust in the EU among Irish citizens over the course of the financial crisis. This paper examines the evolution of attitudes towards the EU in Ireland in this period, and assesses the impact of attitudinal changes on party policy and voting behaviour. It argues that the conditions were ripe for politicisation of European integration by left-wing opposition parties such as Sinn Féin. It examines whether the significant rise in support for Sinn Féin, which was the second biggest party in the 2014 election, can be attributed to its critical stance on European integration. The findings, based on an analysis of party manifestos and voting behaviour over the period, show that a decline in public enthusiasm for the EU did not lead to EU issues becoming politicised by political parties, and attitudes toward the EU did not become a decisive factor in European Parliament elections.

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Introduction

Ireland has always had one of the highest levels of public support for the EU among member states, a fact that is usually attributed to the economic benefits that membership has delivered (Laffan and O'Mahony 2008, 128). However, attitudes towards the EU among the Irish public underwent a significant shift over the course of the financial crisis. Previous research has found that Ireland was among a group of countries (along with Greece, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus and Lithuania) that experienced the greatest increase in Euroscepticism among the public between 2007 and 2011 (Serricchio, Tsakatika, and Quaglia 2013, 57).

Ireland was particularly badly affected by the crisis: unemployment increased from 5% in 2008 to 15% in 2010 (at the time, the second highest in the Eurozone); and government debt as a percentage of GDP rose from 25% in 2007 to 124% in 2013¹. While the dire economic circumstance by themselves may have affected attitudes towards the EU, this was exacerbated by the perceived role of the EU in the crisis. A survey at the time of the 2011 general election found that a large majority of voters believed that the EU was at least partly to blame for the crisis (although the greatest blame was reserved for the Irish government)². A prominent narrative in the Irish media and public debate during this period was that Irish taxpayers were being forced by EU leaders and the ECB to bailout German, French and British banks, whose reckless lending to Irish banks was the cause of the debt crisis. The following quotation from an article in the Irish Independent in December 2010 sums up this view:

‘we are witnessing a monumental struggle between the innocent average Irish person and the guilty creditors of the bust Irish banks...rather than force the ECB to account for its own monumental culpability in allowing out-of-control German and French banks to lend recklessly to Irish banks, the Irish negotiators turned sides and acted as debt collecting agents of foreign banks...This isn't anything like a bailout. Rather it is the EU giving us enough rope to hang ourselves in the hope that we don't hang all of them' (McWilliams 2010).

The growth in negative sentiment towards the EU in Ireland in this period is confirmed by an analysis of Eurobarometer survey data. Figure 1 shows the evolution of attitudes in Ireland in relation to two Eurobarometer questions that were asked consistently over the period. The first panel shows the percentage of respondents who said they ‘tend to trust’ and the percentage who ‘tend not to trust’ the EU institutions. The second panel shows the percentage

of respondents with a positive image of the EU and the percentage with a negative image. There is a strong negative trend in both of these measures from 2008 to 2012, before recovering slightly in 2014. While prior the crisis a majority of Irish respondents said they trusted the EU, this changed radically over the course of the crisis, and from 2011 onwards, more Irish respondents reported that they did not trust the EU than said they did. A similarly precipitous decline can be seen for respondents' image of the EU: a huge majority held a positive image of the EU prior to 2008; but by 2013 only 33% had a positive image. The sharpest drop in both of these measures occurs in the second half of 2011, after the IMF-EU 'bailout' in late 2010 and around the time at which it emerged that a newly elected Irish government had, in face of pressure from the ECB, failed to enforce write-downs on the debt owed to senior bank bondholders.

<FIGURE 1>

This paper is concerned with the political consequences of these attitudinal changes. The economic downturn and associated rise in negative sentiment towards the EU is widely seen as a key factor in the success of radical parties in other countries affected by the economic crisis, such as Greece, Spain and Italy, particularly in the 2014 European Parliament elections (Treib 2014, 1549). On the face of it, Ireland has bucked this trend, as no new Eurosceptic party has emerged to challenge the political mainstream. However, one of the most significant developments in Irish electoral politics over the course of the financial crisis has been the rise of Sinn Féin, a left-wing nationalist party. While not opposed to EU membership, Sinn Féin is generally seen as a soft Eurosceptic party in that it is critical of certain aspects of the design of the EU and particular EU policies, and opposes greater delegation of power to supranational institutions (Charalambous 2011; Frampton 2005; Maillot 2009). One plausible interpretation of the success of Sinn Féin during the financial crisis is that it capitalised on its critical position on European integration at a time of growing opposition to the EU among voters. This paper will seek to establish to what extent this is the case. Two questions in particular are addressed:

1. Did issues related to the EU become more *politicised* over the course of the financial crisis in Ireland?
2. Did attitudes towards the EU come to play a more important role in *vote choice* in European Parliament elections over the course of the financial crisis?

The next section situates these research questions in the context of the literature on Euroscepticism and the politicisation of European integration. Following this, I address the first question by examining the policy positions taken by Irish political parties on European issues, and the attention they gave to these issues, over the course of the period. The analysis then turns to voting behaviour, where the focus is on the European Parliament elections in Ireland from 2004 to 2014. The paper concludes by considering a number of possible explanations for the non-politicisation of European integration.

The political impact of growing Euroscepticism

For an issue such as European integration to become politicised, a political party must bring the issue to the forefront of political debate and give voters the opportunity to express their opinion on European integration at the ballot box (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 13; Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004, 48). Political parties can be expected to attempt to politicise an issue when they see the potential electoral gain from doing so. Growing Euroscepticism among the public, and particular a growing gap between public and elite positions on European integration, creates opportunities for opposition parties to politicise European integration and make it a salient issue in national and European Parliament elections (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 19).

Only certain parties will stand to gain from the politicisation of European integration. Mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties in EU member states have generally supported European integration and have tended to avoid politicising it; while populist opposition parties on the far left and right tend to adopt a more Eurosceptic position and have often sought to make it an election issue (Hooghe and Marks 2008 p 21). Far right parties generally oppose European integration on the grounds that it poses a threat to national sovereignty, while far left parties tend to do so on the grounds that it increases economic uncertainty (De Vries and Edwards 2009). Conditions of economic distress are therefore particularly ripe for the politicisation of European integration by far left parties, and there is evidence that these parties are most successful when there is a combination of high public Euroscepticism and high unemployment (March and Rommerskirchen 2015). The Eurozone debt crisis in particular has created the opportunity for far left parties to politicise European integration in several countries (Statham and Trenz 2014).

In Ireland, European integration and EU issues in general played a very minor role in party competition prior to the financial crisis. The three parties that made up what used to be called Ireland's 'two-and-a-half party system', the centre-right Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael along with the centre-left Labour Party, were solidly pro-EU (Laffan and O'Mahony 2008, Chapter 4). More sceptical positions were provided by two minor parties, the Greens (until the early 2000s) and particularly Sinn Féin (Bolleyer and Panke 2009; Maillot 2009). The pro-EU consensus among the main parties meant that European integration never became a major election issue at national elections or even at European Parliament elections (e.g. Laffan and O'Mahony 2008; Marsh 2009). However, the rejection of the Nice Treaty in 2001 and the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 by Irish voters suggests the existence of a significant gap between the views of the political elite and the public on EU matters (Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott 2005).

Given the extent of the decline in Irish public support for the EU over the course of the financial crisis, it is reasonable to expect that that issues related to the EU and European integration would become increasingly politicised. Sinn Féin is the most likely candidate to seek to drive this politicisation. It is a strongly nationalist party which emphasises national identity and sovereignty. In addition, and unlike most other nationalist parties in Europe, it is a far left party in terms of economic policy (Doyle 2006). It therefore could be expected to emphasise its critical stance on the EU during this period, both on the grounds of the threat it poses to national sovereignty and with reference to the negative consequences of economic austerity. Below, I test this expectation by analysing the election manifestos of the main Irish parties in national and European Parliament elections between 2002 and 2014.

If growing Euroscepticism among the public creates opportunities for parties to politicise EU issues, this in turn is likely to shape vote choice, particularly in European Parliament elections (Hobolt and Spoon 2012). European Parliament elections have traditionally been seen as second-order contests, where voters decide based on domestic considerations such as government performance and matters of national policy (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Voting based on attitudes towards the EU ('issue-voting') has tended to occur only where there are significant differences between the parties on the EU and the election campaigns are dominated by criticisms of the EU (Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009).

In Ireland, previous research has found that second-order factors and candidate evaluations have played a much more important role in vote choice in European Parliament elections than attitudes towards the EU or European integration (e.g. Schön-Quinlivan and Quinlivan 2004).

However, this may well have changed over the course of the financial crisis. One of the biggest changes in election outcomes during this period has been the steady growth of Sinn Féin. In national elections, the party went from 6.9% of the vote and 4 seats in 2007 to 9.9% and 14 seats in 2011. Its rise was more dramatic in European Parliament elections, where the party's vote share increased from 11% in 2004 and 2009 to 19.5% in 2014, becoming the second largest Irish party in the European Parliament. It is plausible that some of this growth is attributable to the growth of Eurosceptic attitudes in Ireland and increased issue-voting in European Parliament elections. This expectation is tested below by analysing the determinants of vote choice in European Parliament elections of 2004, 2009 and 2014.

Did EU issues become more politicised?

Politicisation involves both an increase in the attention given to an issue by political parties and an increase in the degree of polarization among political parties on that issue (Hutter and Grande 2014). In this section, I examine the election manifestos of the four largest parties (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour and Sinn Féin) in the national and European elections held during this period to determine whether or not EU issues became more salient and whether or not party positions on these issues became more polarized.

The most likely forum for party competition on EU issues is European Parliament elections, and below I examine the party manifestos from these elections. However, to gauge the extent to which parties' emphasise EU issues, European Parliament election manifestos are of limited use. Parties must focus on the EU in these manifestos lest they be accused of trivialising the election, even if the campaign is actually dominated by domestic issues. Party competition on EU issues can also take place in the context of national elections, and I begin by examining politicisation over the course of the last three national elections (2002, 2007 and 2011). National election manifestos are useful particularly when it comes to measuring changes in the extent to which parties prioritize EU issues, as in contrast to European Parliament election manifestos, the parties are under no obligation to focus on the EU.

Data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) is used to analyse national election manifestos (Volkens et al. 2014). The Comparative Manifesto Project estimates party salience and party positions on various issue-dimensions based on a content-analysis of national election manifestos. Manifestos are divided into discrete 'quasi-sentences', each expressing a policy position, and these policy statements are assigned to one of 56 policy

categories. Two of these categories are relevant here: one for favourable mentions of the EU, EU expansion, increasing EU or European Parliament competences, or the desirability of membership; and one for negative mentions of same.

These data are used to measure both the salience of EU issues for each party and the degree of party polarisation on these issues over time. The first panel in Figure 2 presents an estimate of the importance of EU issues to each party, based on the total number of statements on the EU (positive or negative) in each manifesto as a percentage of the overall number of statements in the manifesto. Surprisingly, there is an overall decline in the attention given to EU issues between 2002 and 2011 in the manifestos of each of the parties analysed. The decline is most marked for Sinn Féin, the party best placed to gain from the growth of public Euroscepticism over the period. Whereas in 2002, just under 4% of the statements in the Sinn Féin manifesto related to EU issues, by 2011 this had fallen to 0.2%. The only party for which there was not a consistent decline in attention to EU issues in election manifestos was the Labour Party.

The second panel in Figure 2 presents an estimate of the policy positions of the parties during this period, and as such provides a basis for assessing the level of polarization on EU issues. The estimates for party positions are based on the ratio of positive to negative statements on EU issues contained in the manifesto, expressed on a logit scale (see Lowe et al. 2011). There is very little movement in party positions over the period according to this measure, with Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour all maintaining a strong pro-EU position, and Sinn Féin consistently on the opposing side. Against expectations, there is no evidence of an increase in party polarization over the period. The highest level of polarization is recorded in 2007, before the onset of the financial crisis, and in 2011 Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin all recorded a slight moderation in their EU positions according to this measure.

<FIGURE 2>

For a more detailed analysis of the positions of the political parties on EU issues, I turn to the European election manifestos. As previously noted, these manifestos are of little use when gauging the salience of EU issues for political parties, given that they must by their very nature focus on EU affairs. They are, however, the most comprehensive statements of party policy on the EU. A qualitative comparison of the policies outlined in each party's European

manifesto in each election is the most straight forward way to identify shifts in party policy on EU issues.

For the three established parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour), the European election manifestos reveal little evidence of policy shifts. All three describe themselves as pro-European parties throughout the period. For instance, Fine Gael declared in its 2004 manifesto that it was ‘the party of Europe...committed to an EU of close, mutually beneficial co-operation’. This was unaltered by the onset of the financial crisis, and in 2009 the party argued that ‘now, more than ever, Ireland needs the European Union’. Likewise, Fianna Fáil remained steadfastly pro-EU over the period, claimed to be ‘deeply committed to the European Union’ (2009, 4) and ‘a pro-European party’ (2014, 5). Labour describes the EU as a ‘progressive force in Irish life’ (2009, 10) and argues that Europe must act together to tackle the financial crisis (2009, 6; 2014, 3).

This pro-EU position is evident in the support of each party for greater supranationalism and deeper integration in a range of areas. For instance, Labour called for a more prominent role for the European Parliament (2014, 6), and Fianna Fáil criticised the side-lining of the supranational institutions over the course of the financial crisis (2014, 15). Fine Gael advocated a system of direct elections for the position of president of the European Commission (2004, 7) although this policy appears to have been dropped thereafter. Each party outlined a range of policy areas where greater EU involvement was desirable, including asylum and immigration policy (Fine Gael 2004, 16; Fine Gael 2009, 19; Fine Gael 2014, 13; Fianna Fáil 2009, 15); foreign and security policy (Fine Gael 2004, 10; Fine Gael 2009, 15; Fine Gael 2014, 12; Labour 2009, 18; Labour 2014, 11); tackling youth unemployment (Fine Gael 2014, 5; Labour 2009, 6; Labour 2014, 4), financial regulation (Fine Gael 2009, 9; Fine Gael 2014, 6; Fianna Fáil 2009, 9; Fianna Fáil 2014, 7). The only negative references to the EU relate to the issue of red-tape (Fine Gael 2014, 7; Fianna Fáil 2009, 8), and none of the parties blame the EU for Ireland’s economic difficulties.

The position of Sinn Féin on EU issues, while distinct from the other parties, also changed very little over the period. The party’s position can be described (as the party itself does) as one of ‘critical but constructive engagement with the EU’ (Sinn Féin 2004, 6). In all three elections, the party advocated greater intergovernmentalism in decision-making, taking power away from the Commission, enhancing the role of member states and creating greater equality between member states. The party’s position on this matter was most radical in 2004,

when it calls for an end to weighted voting in the Council (Sinn Féin 2004, 16). By 2014, this had been watered down to an unspecified reform of Qualified Majority Voting (Sinn Féin 2014, 23). In each election, the party declared its support for greater integration in certain areas (such as standards to protect workers and tackling climate change) and opposed integration in others (such as foreign and defence policy and tax harmonisation). In addition, the party declared its support in 2014 for an increase in the EU budget and for EU-wide banking regulation (Sinn Féin 2014, 11-12).

While the policies advocated by Sinn Féin over the period remained reasonably constant, the language used in the 2014 manifesto was undeniably more Eurosceptic. For example, on the question of the EU's role in economic policy, the party has consistently argued for greater autonomy for member states. In 2004, this was expressed in relatively mild terms: 'increased centralization of economic power and decision-making power in the hands of unelected, unaccountable and unequal EU bodies is wrong' (Sinn Féin 2004, 26). In 2014 the language was much more emotive: '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 reign in the Commission and return powers to the member states' (Sinn Féin 2014, 5-11). In 2014 the party is also quite explicit in assigning partial blame to the EU for Ireland's economic crisis (Sinn Féin 2014, 10).

On balance, the party manifestos suggest that level of polarization on EU issues remained modest over the course of the financial crisis. All parties dedicated less attention to EU issues in their 2011 general election manifestos than they did in 2002. In terms of positions, the three established parties remained steadfastly pro-EU throughout the period. Sinn Féin does not appear to have moved towards a more explicitly Eurosceptic position, but rather continued its position of 'critical engagement', albeit with the criticism somewhat more to the fore. What is more, Sinn Féin's media campaign in 2014 focused far more on the government's record (in particular, new taxes and cuts to services) rather than EU issues³.

Was there an increase in issue-voting in European Parliament elections?

Given that there is no clear-cut evidence of increased politicisation of EU issues during the period in question, this limits the extent to which we should expect to find an increase in issue voting in European Parliament elections. Nevertheless, it is important to examine whether or not voters were influenced by EU issues to a greater extent during the financial crisis. It is possible, for example, that voters who were dissatisfied with the EU turned to Sinn

Féin, who have a long tradition of Euroscepticism, even though Sinn Féin did not appear to emphasise EU issues in their election campaigns.

The 2004 election is taken as a benchmark against which the 2009 and 2014 elections can be compared. It is generally acknowledged that in 2004 (as in previous elections), EU issues played a very insubstantial role in the campaign and in vote choice. For example, Moxon-Browne (2005, 149) notes that ‘the campaign was marked by an almost complete absence of themes connected to the EU’, while Schön-Quinlivan and Quinlivan argue that the campaign was dominated by personalities rather than issues (2004, 89).

The first election to be held following the onset of the financial crisis was the 2009 European Parliament election. The previous year had seen the beginning of the Irish banking crisis. The government issued a guarantee of bank liabilities in September 2008 and was forced to recapitalise three banks and nationalise one bank by January 2009. Two emergency budgets were introduced in the year leading up to the election (in October 2008 and April 2009), which included significant tax rises and spending cuts. The 2009 election predated the EU-IMF ‘bailout’, so the European dimension to the crisis did not dominate national debate. However, the election also took place in the aftermath of the shock defeat of the 2008 referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, and this brought an added European dimension to the election. In particular, a new political party (Libertas) contested the 2009 election with an explicit anti-Lisbon focus.

The 2014 election is the most likely case for EU issue-voting. As previously noted, public opinion on the EU became increasingly divided in the period between 2009 and 2014, as Ireland entered the bailout programme and as the Fine Gael- Labour government failed in its attempt to secure EU agreement for a write-down of its debts arising from the bank guarantee. However, it is important to note that Ireland exited the bailout programme before the election, in December 2013. Furthermore, attitudes towards the EU recovered slightly during 2013 and 2014 (Figure 1).

To analyse vote choice in EP elections over the period, I rely on data from the European Election Studies from 2004, 2009 and 2014. For each of the main political parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and Sinn Féin) a dichotomous dependent variable indicates whether or not a respondent in a given election gave their first preference vote to the party. A range of independent variables are employed to predict vote choice for each political party. To

facilitate comparison, the same set of independent variables is used for each party and for each of the three elections. Two of these variables relate to the second-order model of vote choice: self-placement on a left-right scale⁴, and a dichotomous indicator of approval or disapproval of the government record. A further two variables relate to the issue-voting model: self-placement on a scale of European unification⁵, and attitudes towards EU membership (coded as 1 if membership is seen as a good thing; 0 otherwise). In addition, a range of demographic variables are included as controls: education, gender, class, and urban/rural location⁶. Finally, a control variable is used for respondents' attachment to the party being analysed (coded as 1 if the respondent feels very or fairly close to the party in question, 0 otherwise). Using this approach, it is possible to compare the impact of each variable over time, and to assess whether attitudes towards the EU played a more important role in vote choice during the financial crisis than was previously the case.

The logistic regression tables are reported in the Appendix, but the main findings relating to the effect of the attitudinal variables on vote choice second are summarised graphically in Figure 3. For each of the four attitudinal variables, the marginal effect (holding other variables in the model constant) on vote choice is shown for each of the three elections (2004, 2009 and 2014). The size of the bar indicates the difference in the in the expected probability of voting for the party, depending on the value of the independent variable⁷. For example, the top bar in the first panel shows that in 2004 a respondent at the maximum point on the left-right scale is estimated to be 9% more likely to vote for Fine Gael than a respondent at the mid-point on that scale, controlling for other factors. The fifth bar in the first panel shows that a respondent who approved of the government's record in 2009 is estimated to be 23% less likely to vote for Fine Gael than someone who disapproved of the government's record.

<FIGURE 3>

It is clear from Figure 3 that assessment of the government's record was by far the most important determinant of voting for Fine Gael in each election. This variable changes from a negative sign in 2004 and 2009 to a positive sign in 2014, reflecting the fact that party was in government in 2014. Attitudes towards EU membership and European unification have a small (and statistically non-significant) effect in every election. There is no evidence of these variables increasing in importance over the course of the period.

A similar pattern is found for Fianna Fáil (shown in the second panel). Government record is an important (and statistically significant) determinant of voting or not voting for the party in every election. Left-right self-placement is also an important predictor in each election. Attitudes towards European unification had no effect in 2004 and 2009, but did have a modest and significant negative effect in 2014. Finally, attitudes towards membership did not have a significant effect on the Fianna Fáil vote in any of the elections.

A more noticeable change over time is evident in the case of the Labour Party vote. The second-order variables (Left-Right and Government Record) are dominant in 2004, but thereafter attitudes towards European unification increase in importance. In 2009 the expected probability of voting for Labour is generally higher (because the party did particularly well that year), meaning that the magnitude of the effects tend to be larger. However, the only attitudinal variables that are statistically significant in 2009 are left-right self-placement and attitudes towards unification. In 2014, meanwhile, attitude towards European unification is the only significant variable.

There is also a clear change over time in the case of Sinn Féin, although here it is one of declining importance of the EU variables and increasing importance of the second order variables. The effect of left-right self-placement increased dramatically in 2014, when (according to the estimates of the model) an individual who placed themselves at the extreme right on this scale was 13% less likely to vote for Sinn Féin than someone at the mid-point of the scale. In contrast, attitudes towards EU membership went from having a large and statistically significant effect in 2004 (where it is estimated that those who believed membership to be a good thing were 6% less likely to vote for the party) to having no effect at all in 2014.

Discussion

The findings of this paper are unequivocal: the hypotheses that EU issues would become more politicised and become a more important factor in vote choice during the financial crisis are not supported. General election manifestos devoted less, rather than more attention to EU issues in 2011 compared to previous elections, and the policy positions outlined in the manifestos of the main political parties did not become noticeably more polarized in either general or European elections. Furthermore, attitudes towards the EU continued to have a very modest effect on vote choice in European Parliament elections throughout the period,

and were far less important than voters' left-right orientation and evaluation of the performance of the national government.

The case of Sinn Féin is particularly surprising. As the only major party with a critical position on European integration, and a left-wing party opposed to austerity, it was best placed to benefit from the increasingly negative sentiment towards the EU among voters. However, the party did not seek to politicise EU issues, and the brunt of their criticism of austerity was directed against the national government rather than the EU. Between the 2004 and 2014 European Parliament elections, attitudes towards the EU went from being a significant to an insignificant factor in the Sinn Féin vote.

There are a number of possible explanations as to why the EU did not become politically more important in Ireland during this period. One has to do with the timing of the elections: negative sentiment towards the EU peaked after the 2011 general election, and had begun to decline by the time of the 2014 European Parliament election (Figure 1). Prior to the 2011 general election, public anger was directed primarily at the Fianna Fáil-led government which had overseen the economic crash. Public opposition to the EU increased after the election of a new government in 2011, as EU-IMF imposed austerity continued. However, as Ireland exited the bailout programme five months before the 2014 European Parliament election, public anger at austerity appears to have been redirected back to the national government who were now in full control of public policy. Had these elections occurred earlier, perhaps Sinn Féin would have sought to make more of its Eurosceptic credentials, and the election would have been more about the EU than about the performance of the national government.

Another explanation concerns the changing domestic political landscape during this period. Prior to the financial crisis, Sinn Féin was a niche party that distinguished itself primarily based on its position on a number of peripheral issues, such as the question of Irish unity and Ireland's relationship with the EU (Maillot 2009). However, between 2011 and 2014 the Labour party, as the junior member of the governing coalition, suffered a precipitous decline in support. This created the opportunity for Sinn Féin to attempt to position itself as the main left-wing party in the country, replacing Labour. The party may have decided to downplay these peripheral issues and focus instead on domestic economic issues in an effort to capture the Labour vote. The voting patterns summarised in Figure 3 bear this out. In the 2014 European Parliament election, the Labour vote was less influenced by second-order factors (left-right positioning, government evaluation) than had previously been the case, and more

influenced by attitudes towards the EU. The reverse is true for Sinn Féin, whose vote in 2014 was shaped by left-right positioning to a much greater extent (and attitudes towards the EU to a lesser extent) than in previous elections.

A third potential explanation has to do with the fact that Sinn Féin, unusually, competes in two separate jurisdictions (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland). Whereas in the Republic Sinn Féin has traditionally been the main dissenting voice on the EU, in Northern Ireland the Democratic Unionist Party (currently the largest party in Northern Ireland) is clearly Eurosceptic. In a survey of election candidates in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin candidates were found to be in the middle of the spectrum in terms of positions on the EU (Lutz and Farrington 2006, 730). There also appears to be differences in the views of Sinn Féin supporters in the two jurisdictions. An analysis of the 2014 European Election Study reveals that a higher proportion of Sinn Féin voters in Northern Ireland believe EU membership to be a good thing compared to Sinn Féin voters in the Republic⁸. The differences in party competition and in the preferences of potential supporters in the two jurisdictions when it comes to EU issues may place constraints on the ability or willingness of Sinn Féin to adopt a more explicitly Eurosceptic position in the Republic.

Whatever the explanation, the shift in public attitudes towards the EU that occurred during the course of the financial crisis in Ireland has not yet had any significant political repercussions. It would be a mistake to interpret the considerable success of Sinn Féin in the 2014 European Parliament election as part of a wider surge in support for far-left and far-right parties driven by growing Euroscepticism (Treib 2014). Against expectations, European integration did not become politicised in Ireland: the EU has continued to be a low salience issue, and European Parliament elections have remained firmly second-order.

Notes

¹ These figures are drawn from the Eurostat website (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>).

² Irish National Election Study 2011. Respondents were asked the following question “In the past few years the economy has been in recession. How responsible, if at all, are each of the following for the poor economic conditions of the past two years?” The distribution of responses when asked about the European Union were: Extremely responsible (16%), Very responsible (25%), moderately responsible (32%), A little responsible (15%), Not at all responsible (6%)

³ See, for example, the press conference at the launch of the manifesto, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHbK7pYsWnE>

⁴ This is measured on a 1-10 scale in the 2004 study and on a 0-10 scale in the 2009 and 2014 studies.

⁵ This is measured on a 1-10 scale in the 2004 study and on a 0-10 scale in the 2009 and 2014 studies.

⁶ All of the demographic variables are dichotomised.

⁷ Specifically, the comparison is made between those at the maximum and mid-point of the two scale variables (Left-right and Unification); and those with a value of 1 and 0 on the two dichotomous variables (Government Approval and Membership). Other variables in the model are held constant at their mode value (for dichotomous variables) or mean value (for scale variables).

⁸ In the Republic, 59% of Sinn Féin voters believed EU membership to be a good thing (compared to 69% for all respondents). In Northern Ireland, 64% of Sinn Féin voters believed EU membership to be a good thing (compared to 45% for all respondents).

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Figures

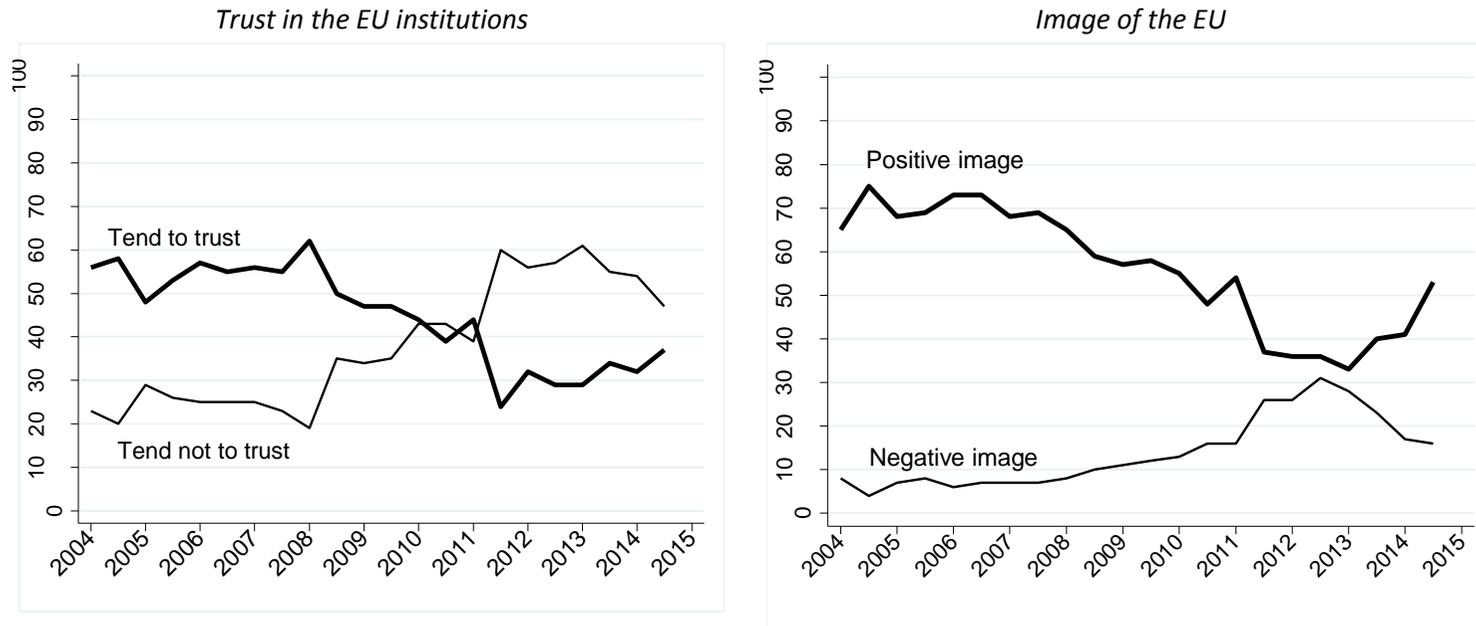
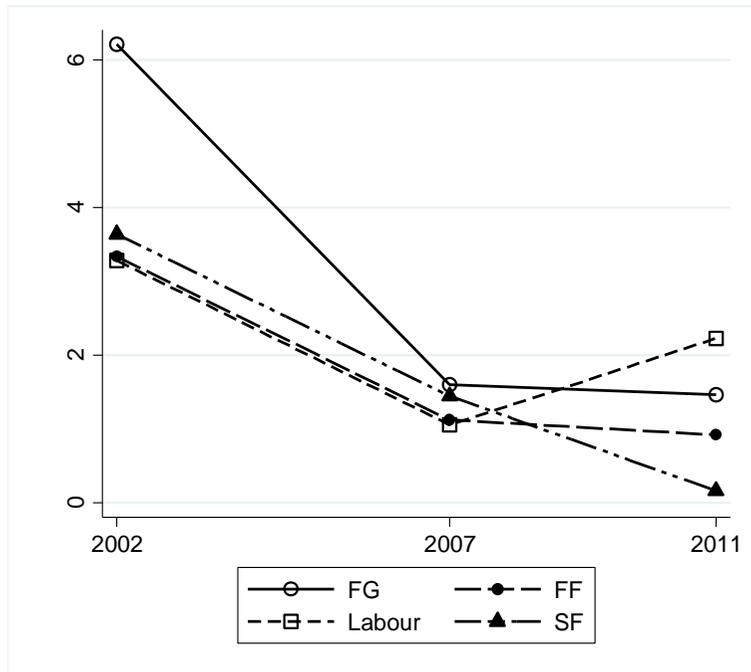


Figure 1: evolution of public attitudes towards the EU in Ireland.
Note: figures compiled from Eurobarometer 61-82.

Attention to EU issues



Positions of parties on EU issues

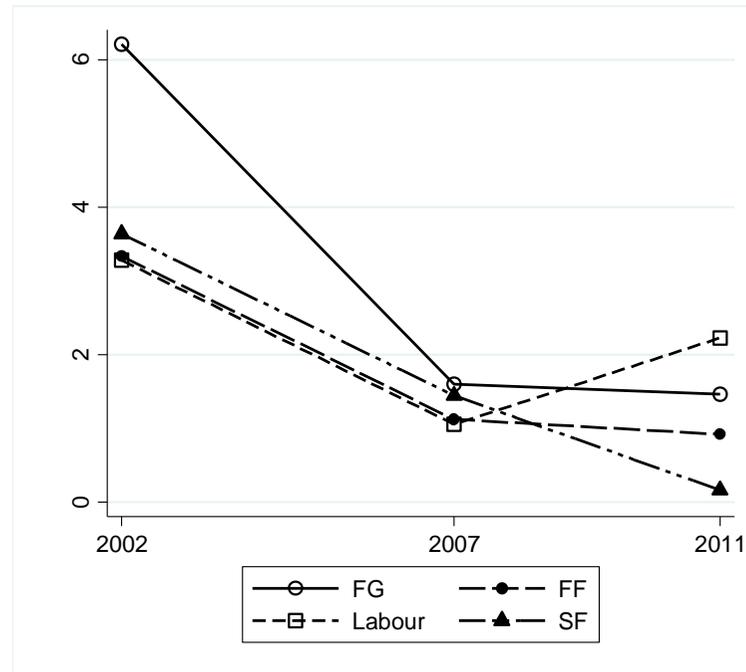


Figure 2: Attention to EU issues and party positions on EU issues in general election manifestos (CMP data)



Figure 3: Marginal effects of attitudinal variables on vote choice in 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections.

Notes: Based on logistic regression analysis of vote choice which also included controls for gender, education, class, and party attachment. Bars ordered by year (see Appendix)

† statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Appendix

Logistic regression analyses of vote for each party at each election

	Fine Gael			Fianna Fáil			Labour			Sinn Féin		
	2004	2009	2014	2004	2009	2014	2004	2009	2014	2004	2009	2014
Party attachment (1= very/fairly close; 0=otherwise)	1.94*	2.13*	2.79*	1.02*	1.19*	4.62*	2.29*	2.71*	4.02*	3.40*	-	3.52*
Left-Right self-placement†	.08*	.09*	.11	.22*	0.18*	.29*	-.28*	-.15*	-.13	-.17*	-.14	-.45*
EU membership (1=good thing; 0=bad thing/neither)	-.05	.32	.27	.19	.61	.37	.28	-.50	-.07	-.82*	-.55	-.08
EU unification self-placement†	.02	-.00	-.02	-.02	-.01	-.12*	.01	.10*	.21*	.01	.17	-.05
Government record (1=approve; 0=disapprove)	-.78*	-1.18*	1.52*	1.77*	1.82*	-1.01*	-.73*	-.51	.80	-.75*	-	-.87*
Education (1=at least age 20 when stopped full time education; 0=less than 20)	-.38*	.17	-.42	-.30	-.44	.59	1.12*	-.17	.39	.06	-.51	-.37
Gender (1=female; 0=male)	-.08	-.09	.37	.14	.04	.06	.19	.17	.62	-.67*	.61	-.57
Location (1=urban; 0=rural)	-.58*	-.17	.35	-.09	-.41	-.05	.63*	.48*	-.82	.46	.08	.02
Class (1=middle/upper middle class; 0=lower middle/working class)	.56*	.55*	.78*	-.08	-.33	-.32	-.20	-.36	.15	-.75*	-.89	-.51
Constant	-1.13*	-1.55*	-4.08*	-3.00*	-.29	-3.04*	-1.97*	-.91*	-3.62*	-.36	-3.07*	1.86
Pseudo r ²	.09	.07	.31	.20	.17	.39	.20	.12	.26	.18	.08	.34
N	820	632	470	820	632	470	820	632	470	820	644	470

Notes: Dependent variable indicates whether or not a respondent voted for the party in question. For Sinn Féin in 2009, the variables 'Government record' and 'Party attachment' are dropped as they are perfectly correlated with the dependent variable

*p<0.05.

†Measured on a 1-10 scale in 2004 and a 0-10 scale in 2009 and 2014.