What Contributed to Sinn Féin's surge in popularity during the 2020 general election campaign in Ireland?

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Abstract

The campaign leading up to the general election on 8 February 2020 in Ireland was eventful and its result unanticipated. Ireland's usual bipartisan voting trend was broken with the Sinn Féin party winning the most first preference votes for the first time since August 1923. Throughout the twentieth century, the Sinn Féin party mostly lay dormant. It began its continuous contesting of elections in 1987. However, ten years later in the last general election of the twentieth century, Sinn Féin's support had only risen to 2.5%. Since then, the party has slowly gone from strength to strength with its percentage of first-preference votes breaking the threshold of double digits in February 2016 with 13.85%.

This thesis examines the potential reasons for the leap of over 10% in first-preference votes in the space of one general election seen by Sinn Féin. It looks at the social media tactics of the party in comparison to those (or lack thereof) of the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parties. It examines the messaging of these three parties with reference to each party's manifesto. Since the economic crash of 2008, Ireland has seen itself in the grips of health and housing crises. The effects of this on the Irish electorate will also be explored with reference to the strong front bench of the Sinn Féin party.

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

The general election in Ireland which was held on 8 February 2020 was a momentous event. Not only was it the first time an Irish general election was held on a Saturday since 1918, it was also the first time since the general election of June 1927 that a third party outside of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael reached over 20% of the first-preference vote-share of the Irish electorate. In the general election in November 1992 and that of February 2011, the Labour party reached just under 20% but did not break this threshold. The Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties have been the main contenders in a dual-party Irish political system until the general election of February 2020 when Sinn Féin surpassed both parties with 24.53% of first-preference votes. Figure 1 (*The Irish Times*, 2020) displays the percentage of first-preference votes in the February 2020 election. Fianna Fáil received 22.18% of first-preference votes and Fine Gael received 20.86%.
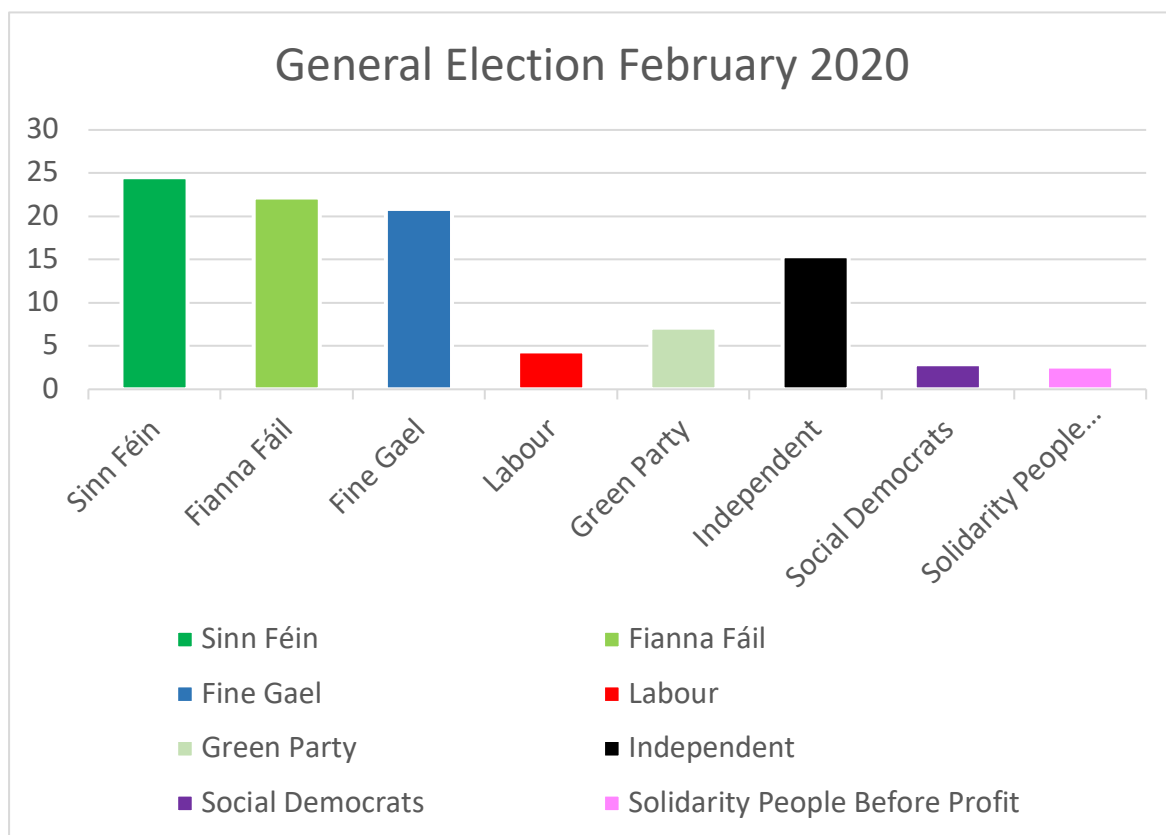
Figure 1: % of Dáil seats obtained by each party/ alliance, 2020.

This leap in popularity is made more surprising due to the fact that the Sinn Féin party received 9.5% of the vote-share at the local elections and 11.7% at the European elections which were both held on 24 May 2019 (*The Irish Times*, 2019). The party won 81 seats which is 78 fewer than the previous local election results in 2014 and a loss of 49% of its total number of seats (*The Irish Times*, 2019). The most recent general election before February 2020 was held on 26 February 2016. According to the 2016 Results Hub of *The Irish Times* website, Fine Gael received a majority of the vote-share with 25.53%, Fianna Fáil received 24.35%, Independents received 20.01% and Sinn Féin arrived in fourth place with 13.85%.

This thesis will examine the following research question:

What Contributed to Sinn Féin's surge in popularity during the 2020 general election campaign in Ireland?

There is a gap in the research due to the short time that has elapsed between the general election in February 2020 and the time of writing. Little academic research has been released on the possible causes behind the outcome of the 2020 election. This research will look at the campaign of Sinn Féin leading up to the 2020 election as well as events which may have worked in favour of the party during this time and in the preceding years. The social media tactics of Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will be analysed as well as the influence of Sinn Féin's front bench politicians on public opinion. The aftershocks of the economic crash of 2008 will also be discussed with particular emphasis on the current health and housing crises in Ireland.

In an interview with the author on 17 June, Journalist and Author Deaglán de Bréadún, made the point that "[i]t's not that long since Sinn Féin people were banned from TV and radio and didn't get much space in the newspapers either, by and large". Enabled by the powers bestowed upon him under the Broadcasting Act of 1960, Gerry Collins, the then Minister for Posts and Telegraphs signed an order in October 1971 which instructed broadcast media to refrain from broadcasting "any

matter that could be calculated to promote the aims or activities of any organisation which engages in, promotes, encourages or advocates the attaining of any particular objective by violent means" (Houses of the Oireachtas, 1971). "A new directive in 1976 extended the application of the ban to a number of political organisations, including Sinn Féin" (Maillot, 2004, p. 76).

Maillot (2004) believes that as a result of this ban and misinterpretations of its jurisdictions in the coming years, the media "contributed to cornering Sinn Féin into an image where it was, solely, the political wing of the IRA by only covering stories that related to the IRA and by ignoring the party's involvement in social or economic issues" (p. 76). In the years after the Good Friday Agreement (or Belfast Agreement) which ended the conflict in Northern Ireland, "although Irish public opinion generally associated Sinn Féin with a violent past, it was nevertheless beginning to exonerate the party for this because of the role it played in the peace process" (Maillot, 2004, p. 82).

Many former members of the Sinn Féin party have been linked with the Republican movement in Northern Ireland and the party-members' involvement was a prevailing narrative with regard to Sinn Féin before the appointment of Mary Lou McDonald as leader of the party. The previous leader, Gerry Adams has been repeatedly accused and detained on suspicion of his involvement in the IRA during the conflict in Northern Ireland. The February 2020 general election was the first of its kind with McDonald as leader of the Sinn Féin party after Adams' tenure of nearly 35 years. This generational shift has allowed the party to distance itself further from the Northern Ireland conflict and in 2020 helped the party in portraying itself as a genuine contender for government in the Republic of Ireland.

In Chapter II a brief history of the political landscape of Ireland in the twentieth century is provided. This chapter will also look at the political climate in Europe in recent years with particular focus on the Podemos party in Spain and the Syriza party in Greece who followed a similar journey to that of Sinn Féin. Chapter III will detail the type of research undertaken for the purpose of this thesis. It will discuss

the mixed methods research used and why it was necessary. The three largest political parties of the 2020 Irish general election, Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been chosen as subjects in this research.

In 'The General Election and after', Molyneux (2020) claims that since the 2008 economic crash, much of the Irish electorate began to perceive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as "identical twins who promote the same policies, looking after the rich and privileged" (p. 5). Ireland was one of five countries who needed a formal bailout "after the government rescue of its banking sector in turn provoked a run on government debt" (Hopkin, 2020, p. 166). The years which followed were privy to austerity measures and Ireland experiencing "the deepest recession in the industrialized world between 2007 and 2010, with a GDP decline of 21 percent and fiscal deficits of up to 12 percent" (Hopkin, 2020, p. 166). According to Hopkin (2020), the people of Ireland saw an increase in living expenses and experienced a decrease in median wages of 3% (p. 167).

Hopkin (2020) claims that the differences in experiences of varying social groups "conditioned the type of political reaction that resulted from it" (p. 169). Fine Gael's manifesto and campaign slogan in 2016 was "Let's Keep The Recovery Going" (Fine Gael, 2016). By this point, many people had not felt the recovery that the party wished to continue. Failings of Fianna Fáil with regard to the economic crash and the subsequent austerity measures were still fresh in the memory of the Irish electorate. Fine Gael received a marginal majority in 2016 and entered a confidence and supply arrangement with Fianna Fáil. The years that ensued saw health and housing crises worsen in Ireland. This is examined in Chapter IV with reference to Sinn Féin's campaign of 'change' and why it resonated with the Irish electorate.

Also discussed in Chapter IV is the possible aforementioned generational shift within the party. De Bréadún outlines disadvantageous interviews experienced by Adams in 2016, whereas "Mary Lou didn't have any self-damaging interviews of that nature as party leader in the latest election". In an interview with the author on 22 June, Sinn Féin's current Spokesperson for Agriculture and Director of Elections for the 2016

election campaign, TD Matt Carthy states that in 2016 "a big part of the focus was unfortunately trying to respond to the attacks that were coming on us, as opposed to being able to be proactively outlining our own message". He discusses how this was not the case in 2020 and the research outlines tactics employed by the party to effectively disseminate its primary messages. The expertise of its front bench members on contentious issues in the eyes of the Irish electorate also seem to have influenced the party's popularity with the Irish public.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

In *Sinn Féin, A Hundred Turbulent Years*, Brian Feeney (2002) describes Sinn Féin as the public face of the republican movement" (p, 12). Sinn Féin was founded in 1905 by Arthur Griffith. Its name translated into English means 'We Ourselves'. The party was established in a politically tumultuous time in Ireland when the nation was under British rule and between its second (1893) and third (1912) attempts at passing a Home Rule bill. Home Rule was the demand for a domestic parliament to be established in Ireland in an attempt to return governance to the nation.

The First World War began in 1914 and an Irish Republican rebellion was organised for Easter 1916. Despite the military defeat of the 1916 Easter Rising, it was a pivotal time in the nationalist campaign to free Ireland from British rule: "The Easter Rising actually strengthened the insurrectionists. Most survived, gained retrospective approval and political credibility, and were released within a year, astonishingly free to resume and recruit" (McGarry, 2003, p. 34). The main groups who carried out the Easter Rising were The Irish Volunteers, The Irish Citizen Army and Cumann na mBan. In 'Paramilitary Politics and the Irish Revolution', Hart (2003) states that "Sinn Féin was reorganised and republicanised in 1917" (p. 28).

Despite denying mutual affiliation, "[i]ndividual [Irish Volunteer] members were encouraged to work for Sinn Féin in elections, and many units acted as guards for speakers and polling booths", (Hart, 2003, cited in McGarry, 2003, p.28). Hart also notes that many of The Volunteers left the militia to pursue a career in politics. The Irish Volunteers "evolved into the IRA [Irish Republican Army] during the war of independence" (Ferriter, 2013). The IRA henceforth survived in different capacities. There was a "split in Sinn Féin in 1970" (Gallagher, 2009, p. 421) over the issue of abstentionism in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland parliaments. The "two

competing wings of the republican movement came to be known as the Official IRA/ Official Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA/ Provisional Sinn Féin" (De Bréadún, 2015).

Patterson (1990) describes former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams as "the central figure in the development of the strategy of the Provisional republican movement since the mid-1970s" (p. 5). Adams served two prison sentences in the 1970s for his involvement in the IRA. He was detained in 2014 for questioning for four days over his alleged involvement in the IRA murder of Jean McConville in 1972. Although Adams denies his involvement with the IRA, while leader he was seen as "a human reminder to potential Sinn Féin voters of the dark days of the IRA" (De Bréadún, 2015). Adams succeed Ruairí Ó'Brádaigh as leader of the Sinn Féin party in 1983 and "[b]y 1986 his political and ideological domination in the movement was strong enough to allow a resolution against abstentionism to be passed at the Sinn Fein ArdFheis (annual conference)" (Patterson, 1990, p. 6).

The following year, Sinn Féin began to consistently contest elections. In 1987, Sinn Féin received less than 2% of the Irish vote and did not have a party member elected to the Dáil. Patterson (1990) writes that "Gerry Adams argued that the 1987 election came too soon after the anti-abstentionist decision at the 1986 ArdFheis" (p. 16). He also blamed the restrictions on the party under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, 1960 which excluded Sinn Féin from the airwaves. Patterson (1990) describes the resurrection of Sinn Féin as an attempt "of the early Provisionals to incorporate a new active role for the political wing of the [republican] movement… to enlist the support of the masses and particularly the working class in the Irish Republic" (p. 5). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the 'Armalite and the ballot box' strategy was pursued.

After the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, a ceasefire was called and the decommissioning of paramilitary groups was due to take place. The International Monitoring Commission was set up in 2004 "[t]o monitor and report on the continuing activities of paramilitary groups" (International Monitoring Commission, 2011, p. 7) in

Northern Ireland. It (2011) stated that the Provisional IRA decommissioned in September 2005 and "between June 2009 and February 2010 the UVF/RHC, the mainstream and South East Antrim element of the UDA, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) and the Official IRA all decommissioned their weapons" (p. 11). Despite this, the Commission (2011) acknowledges that dissident republican groups are still "brutally active" (p. 11).

1.2 IRISH GENERAL ELECTION TRENDS, 1918-2020:

In the first general election in Ireland in 1918, Sinn Féin won 73 out of 105 Irish seats in the House of Commons in Westminster. However, due to Sinn Féin's policy of abstentionism, the party did not take these seats. Subsequently the first Dáil was formed and met on the 21st of January 1919.

Westminster passed the Government of Ireland Act, 1920 which granted Home Rule to Ireland and created two parliaments, one in Dublin and one in Belfast. A general election was held in December of 1922 in which Sinn Féin won 124 seats out of 128 in the south parliament of Ireland, seats which the party took an oath not to occupy. The next general elections took place in August 1923 and September 1927 in which Sinn Féin won 44 seats and 5 seats respectively. After the War of Independence, Sinn Féin split into two sides: pro-treaty and anti-treaty. Pro-Treaty Sinn Féin became Cumann na nGael in 1927 (later Fine Gael) and the Anti-Treatyites formed Fianna Fáil in 1926. Sinn Féin went into a "state of electoral dormancy" (Gallagher, 2009, p. 205) and did not contest an election from 1927 until 1957.

In December 1957, "the IRA began a fresh campaign of violence in Northern Ireland, triggering a government clampdown but also, it seemed, reinvigorating some traditional republican sympathies" (Gallagher, 2009, p.129). Sinn Féin won 4 seats in the 1957 general election in Ireland. However, still bound by an oath, the elected Teachtaí Dalaí (TDs) did not take their seats in government. In the following election

of 1961, Sinn Féin ran candidates, however they did not win any seats. Gallagher (2009) notes that "the republican tide that had taken Sinn Féin to four seats in 1957 had clearly ebbed" (p.169).

After the split in 1970, the majority group downplayed "traditional nationalism in favour of a left-wing analysis of Irish society" (Gallagher, 2009, p.420) and was commonly referred to as 'Official Sinn Féin'. It changed its name to Sinn Féin The Workers' Party (SFWP) in January 1977. In April 1982 it changed its name to 'The Workers' Party' and it "merged with Labour in 1999" (Gallagher, 2009, p. 221). The minority group of the split became the current Sinn Féin Party and resumed contesting elections in 1987. Figure 2 (Gallagher, 2009; *The Irish Times*, 2020) demonstrates the trajectory of Sinn Féin, Fine Gael, Fianna Fàil and Labour in the general elections from February 1987 to February 2020.
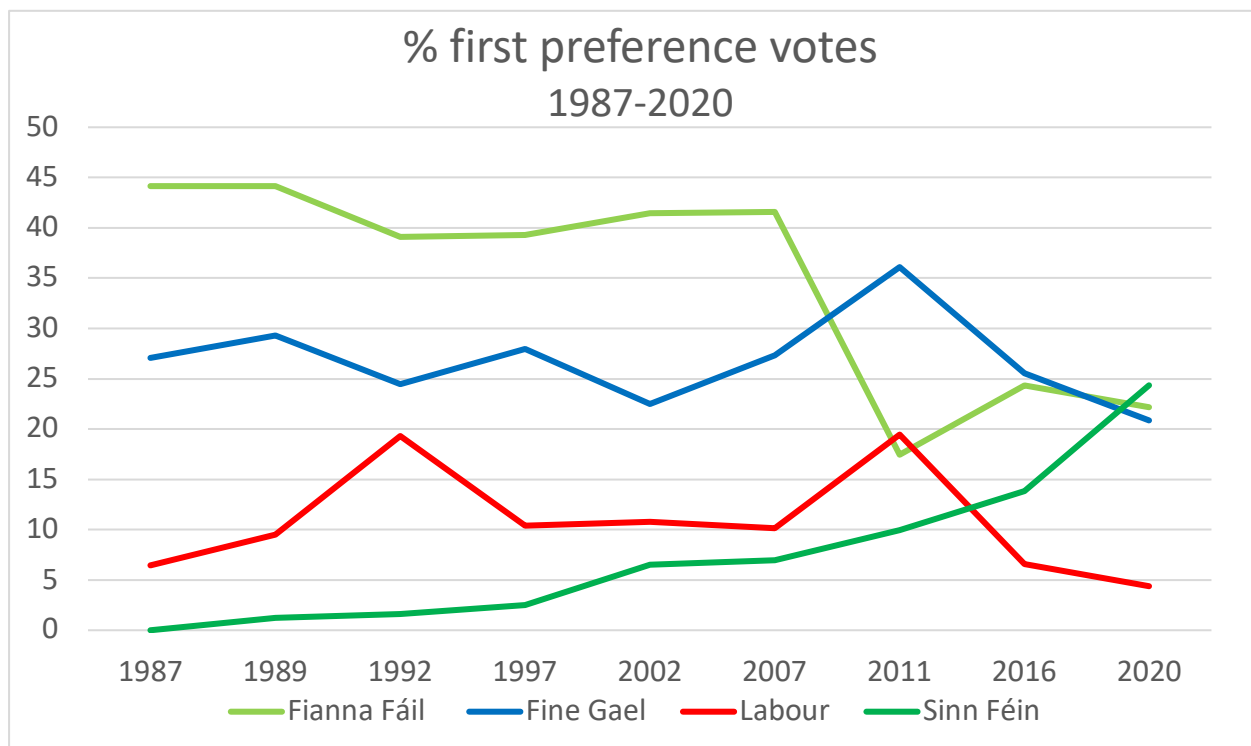
Figure 2: % of first preference votes from 1987-2020

In 2020, Fianna Fáil won 38 seats (37 elected and the Ceann Comhairle, Seán Ó'Fearghaíl, who was not up for re-election), Sinn Féin won 37 seats and the most first preference votes, Fine Gael won 35 seats, and Labour won 6 seats.

1.3 RECENT 'POPULIST' TRENDS IN EUROPE:

Fernández- Garcia and Luengo conducted a study on so-called 'populist' parties in Western Europe. They (2017) concluded that in Southern Europe and Ireland, "the threat to the political establishment comes mostly from the radical left (Podemos, Syryza, Sinn Féin People Before Profit, Left Bloc and Unitary Democratic Coalition)" (p. 57). Referencing Mudde (2004), they (2017) define populism as an ideology split into two sides, "'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (p. 58), the former arguing "that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (p. 58). Spain's Podemos Party and the Syriza party of Greece followed a similar trajectory to that of Sinn Féin on their journey to electoral success. Both parties were also part of the five countries who received formal bailouts after the 2008 economic crash.

1.4 THE PODEMOS PARTY:

The Podemos party entered the Spanish political scene on 17 January 2014. Within two years, it became "an unavoidable player in the Spanish political arena" (Nez, 2017, p 113). Four months after its inception at the European elections of May 2014, Podemos received "nearly 8 per cent of the votes (i.e. more than 1.2 million) and five MEP seats" (Nez, 2017, p. 113). The year 2015 became pivotal for the party. Podemos ran for election in Spain's regional elections, achieving third place in nine of the 15 regions. Nez (2017) describes Podemos' performance as an "historic breakthrough" (p. 114) as the party established itself as the third national party "with 20.66 per cent of the votes and 69 MPs" (p. 114).

Before the emergence of Podemos, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Psoe) and the conservative right-wing Popular Party (PP) "alternated in power since the restauration of democracy" (Nez, 2017, p. 114) in the late 1970s. With the arrival of the economic crash in 2008, Spain went through an economic and social crisis. In tandem, the country also saw a "crisis of legitimacy of the political parties and elites." (Nez, 2017, p. 115). Pre-2008, Spain's economic success was largely attributed to strong growth in the construction and public-works sectors. Its collapse "led to an explosion of the rate of unemployment soaring from 8.57 per cent in 2007 to levels systematically above 20 per cent since 2010." (Nez, 2017, p.115). This resulted in a deluge of housing evictions which the Victims of Bankruptcy Platform estimate was "more than 360,000 between the beginning of the crisis in 2008 and the first quarter of 2012" (Nez, 2017, p. 115).

The wealth gap increased in Spain as a result and "the wealthiest 20 per cent now possess[ed] 7.5 times more wealth than the poorest 20 per cent whereas the ratio was 5.5 in 2007" (Nez, 2017, p. 116). Psoe and PP were implicated in numerous corruption cases connected to the housing speculation which led to the economic crash in 2008. By "2014 there were around 1,700 law-suits for political corruption in Spain and more than 500 people were prosecuted." (Nez, 2017, p.116). One case implicated Mariano Rajoy, Prime Minister from 2011-2018, "who is thought to have received 25,200 euros a year over 11 years" (Nez, 2017, p. 116). He was forced to step down after a vote of no confidence against him was passed in 2018. There was a loss of confidence in elected representatives and political parties in Spain which gave birth to the 15-M movement (anti-austerity movement).

The political and economic crises in Spain provided an opportunity for Podemos. Sola and Rendueles (2017) refer to the 15 M movement as "the "catalyst for massive demonstrations against the austerity policies that took place over the next two years." (p. 5). Subsequently, the Podemos party emerged "over the rubble of the economic and political crises, with the wind of the 15M in its favour" (Sola,

Rendueles, 2017, p .7). The already well-known Pablo Iglesias was appointed its leader. At the time of appointment, he was "a 36-year old university professor with a long engagement in activism" (Sola, Rendueles, 2017, p .7). According to Sola and Rendueles (2017), "it is no exaggeration to say that Iglesias' visibility constituted the main asset of the party" (p. 7).

Pablo Iglesias is widely referred to as a "charismatic leader" (Sola, Redueles, 2017; Nez, 2017). Sarah Bienzobas who worked on Podemos' campaign for the 2014 European elections claims "everyone can identify themselves with Pablo Iglesias" (cited in Nez, 2017, p. 124). Iglesias frequently appeared on general public programmes and debates which played a "central role in sending out the message of the candidature to places that would have been impossible to reach in any other way" (Fernández-Albertos, 2015, cited in Nez, p. 52). Other figureheads within the Podemos party included Iñigo Errejón, a 32-year-old political strategist and Teresa Rodríguez, "a secondary school teacher aged 34" (Nez, 2017, p. 120). As stated by Nez (2017), Podemos won the support "of voters in widely differing social and occupational categories as much among the middle classes as within the working classes" (p. 125).

Sola and Redueles (2017) categorise Podemos as "without any doubt, a European version of 'left-wing' populism" (p. 10). They (2017) detail how its electoral mandate was typical of a traditional alternative left-wing party: "restructuring of foreign debt, tax reform, progressive state intervention in the economy, women's rights" (p.10). Despite this, a key strategy and reason behind Podemos' success was the avoidance of presenting itself as an alternative left-wing party: "In other words, Podemos has adopted a left-wing populist strategy precisely by avoiding any reference to populism and to the left." (Sola, Redueles, 2017, p. 11). Jorge Lago a sociologist and member of Podemos' culture commission explains this strategy:

> I tried to show, from a theoretical point of view, that there is a way of having the traditional speeches one is used to [in militant spheres] made intelligible by translating them into a more inclusive language [...]. For example, "anti-capitalism" or "economic democracy" means almost the same thing but the first expression frightens whereas the other does not.
>
> (cited in Nez, 2017, p.121)

The Podemos Party positioned itself as the embodiment of change in Spanish politics. The name Podemos translates to 'We can' "and the slogan taken up from the anti-housing evictions movement and the anti-austerity movement (*Sí se puede*, 'Yes, we can') emphasise a real opportunity for change" (Nez, 2017, p.123). Iglesias built on this by frequently categorising the Spanish political system as "on the one hand, the partisans of austerity and on the other the promoters of change" (Nez, 2017, p. 122).

Fernández-Garcia and Luengo (2017) illustrate strong similarities between Sinn Féin and Podemos in terms of their respective anti-elitist rhetoric, taxation policies, equality for those considered more vulnerable in society. They both target "big corporations and bankers" (Fernández-Garcia, Luengo, 2017, p. 67) and promote the sovereignty of the people against the current political class. In *Power Play, The Rise of Modern Sinn Féin*, before the success of Sinn Féin in the 2020 election, De Bréadún (2015) recognises that Sinn Féin's trajectory was coinciding "with the emergence of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain as major electoral forces".

1.5 THE SYRIZA PARTY:

At the Sinn Féin Ardfheis in March 2015, one of the guest speakers was Syriza's soon to be Minister for Finance, Euclid Tsakalotos. Introduced by MEP Lynn Boylan, she praised Tsakalotos and the Syriza party as "a government that has shown how

you stand up for your people" (Sinn Féin, 2015). Tsakalotos spoke about the similarities between the issues faced by the Greek and Irish societies. He proclaimed:

> Syriza and Sinn Féin as well as others [such] as Podemos are part of a great realignment in European politics that has become apparent over the last couple of years. That realignment is a necessity exactly because we have such a crisis in the existing arrangements, in which traditional parties are unable to address effectively their social base on an agenda of wages, jobs and welfare.
>
> (Sinn Féin, 2015)

Syriza, meaning Radical Coalition of the Left was founded in 2004 as a coalition of parties with "the party Synaspismos (Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology) the key component" (*BBC News*, 2015a). Before the economic crisis of 2008, Syriza "had managed to establish a strong presence within social movements and activist initiatives, yet remained a marginal force, polling around 4-5% at the national level" (Katsambekis, 2015, p. 154). Up until this time, Katsambekis (2015) states that the middle classes "were still relevantly well off, maintaining a reluctant attachment to Pasok and ND" (p. 154).

In 1974, Greece transitioned to democracy with "a remarkably stable political system, structured around two main pillars: on the left, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), a social-democratic party with populist roots; on the right, New Democracy (ND), a liberal-conservative party" (Aslandis, Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1078). The economic crisis in 2008 lead to a social, economic and political crisis which resulted in "a major readjustment of the party system" (Aslandis, Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1077). Aslandis and Kaltwasser (2016) describe the chronic misallocation of funds which forfeited the general welfare of the people of Greece while contributing "greatly

to the mountain of sovereign debt that became unmanageable after 2009" (p. 1078). The incumbent ND party lost its majority in government in a snap parliamentary election in 2009 "passing the hot potato straight to George Papandreou, the social-liberal president of PASOK and Socialist International" (Aslandis, Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1078). A similar situation befell Ireland when Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael went from 47% and 20% first-preference votes respectively in June 2008 to the general election of 2011 when Fine Gael became the majority party with 36% of the first-preference vote to Fianna Fáil's 17%.

In the 2009 parliamentary election, Syriza "collected 4.6 percent and 13 seats" (Lansford, 2015, 562) which was 0.4% less than it had received in the 2007 parliamentary elections. Lansford (2015) attributes Syriza's inability to benefit from the social, political and economic upheaval at the time to its failure "to provide a convincing alternative" (562). Papandreou refused to relinquish fiscal sovereignty and increased austerity measures as a condition of the bailout which "sparked a wave of large demonstrations and unceasing strikes, culminating with the massively popular Greek *indignados* movement in May 2011" (Aslandis, Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1078). Papandreou resigned as Prime Minister of Greece in November 2011 and a "technocratic government took over to enforce austerity with the backing of ND and LAOS [Popular Orthodox Rally party], a small populist radical-right party" (Aslandis, Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1078). Syriza and its junior partner, the Independent Greeks National Patriotic Alliance (ANEL) were in opposition from 2012- 2015 and during this time "became a government-in-waiting" (Aslandis, Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1088).

According to Aslandis and Kalwasser (2016), the Greek political sphere left voters feeling betrayed, "abandoned or deceived" (p. 1078) which provided Syriza with an opportunity to challenge the long-established bipartisan system. Much of Syriza's electoral success is attributed to its "young and popular leader, Alexis Tsipras" (Aslandis, Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1077). The "40-year-old radical" (Smith, 2015) became Greece's youngest leader when Syriza won the January 2015 parliamentary

election. Tsakatika (2016) stated "electoral campaigns, increasingly after 2012, were focused to a considerable extent on [Tsipras'] person" (p. 19). A Syriza communications strategist purports why: "We had a charismatic leader who is… young, no one can attribute anything to him from the past, he has a strong critique against corruption" (cited in Tsakatika, 2016, p. 19).

As well as being charismatic, the party leadership expanded its social reach by frequently appearing in the public eye presenting, explaining and debating "the party's economic strategy in the mass media while attacking the mainstream parties' economic strategies with knowledgeable, technically sound and politically sophisticated arguments" (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 17). Syriza discredited the sitting government on its acceptance of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which set out "an extensive package of austerity measures and structural reforms that Greece would need to implement in return for a 110 billion euro 'bail-out' loan" (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 5).

Syriza presented itself as the historical successor of the National Liberation Front (EAM) who organised the Greek resistance against German occupation. Manolis Glezos, "octogenarian hero of the resistance against German Occupation" (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 14) was seen in the ranks of Syriza. As a party of coalitions, Syriza was able to present itself "as a unifying, rather than sectarian, political project" (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 21). Syriza also promoted renegotiating the MoU in a way "that does not entail leaving the EU or the Eurozone" (Tsakatika, 2016, p. 23). This endorsed Syriza's image of unification and helped the party to appeal to many different social categories.

Papanikolopoulos and Rongas (2019) write that Syriza was helped by "the increasing polarization between the ruling mainstream parties on the one hand and a wide range of hard-hit social groups" (p. 185) as a result of subsequent austerity

measures after the economic crash of 2008. After winning a majority in the Hellenic government in January 2015, a referendum was held on 5 July in Greece to accept or reject the conditions of the third bailout offered to Greece by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Troika). Despite a majority of the Greek public voting against these conditions the Syriza party signed a new bailout memorandum which was accompanied by new austerity measures "contrary with its promises for putting an end to the austerity policies" (Papanikolopoulos, Rongas, 2019, p. 193). Tspipras "lost his majority in August" (*BBC News*, 2015b) in government and called a snap election in September 2015. Tsipras was re-elected and the Syriza party lost four seats.

1.7 CONCLUSION:

De Bréadún (2015) refers to Sinn Féin as having been "the pariahs of Irish politics" until the twenty first century. In the cases of Podemos and Syriza, choice of leadership was an integral element of their respective electoral successes. Like Iglesias and Tsipras, McDonald is praised for her charisma and confidence. Harry McGee (2013) writes in *The Irish Times* that "[t]here are few politicians who impress TDs from rival parties more than McDonald. She is a great communicator, authoritative and focused". Fiach Kelly (2020) describes her as "warm, friendly and approachable, and this came across in broadcast coverage of her daily walkabouts" during the 2020 campaign.

Both Spain and Greece were hard-hit after the 2008 economic crash, the effects of which could still be seen when the Podemos party and the Syriza party won a majority in the respective Spanish and Greek general elections. There was also an atmosphere of austerity in Ireland after the 2008 economic crash. After financial prosperity was ostensibly restored, the Irish public still found themselves in health and housing crises by 2020. Sinn Féin benefited from this atmosphere of discontent. Like Podemos and Syriza, Sinn Féin's portrayal of Ireland became one of the elite versus the average worker. Their manifesto (2020), which was launched on 28

January was given the title 'Giving workers & families a break, A Manifesto for Change' (p. 1). The title of the introduction is 'Time for Change, Time for Sinn Féin'. It (2020) details the last 100 years, during which time the people of Ireland have had "Governments for the wealthy, Governments for the privileged, Governments for the property developers, Governments for the banks" (p. 3).

Similar to Spain and Greece, there had been a long-established dual-party system in Ireland which had been in place for nearly 100 years. Sinn Féin (2020) coupled Fine Gael with Fianna Fáil and presented itself as the best alternative: "a government for the people" (p. 3). Sinn Féin's politicians emulated this rhetoric frequently in the public eye during their campaign prior to the general election. One well known example is when McDonald accused the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Parties of being one and the same and referred to their leaders as "Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee" (Claire Byrne Live, 2020).

The next chapter will detail the research methods employed for the purpose of this thesis.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

1.1 OVERVIEW:

In order to determine the possible influences on Sinn Féin's popularity in the 2020 general election, it was necessary to perform both quantitative and qualitative analysis. This chapter will discuss the benefits of mixed methods research with reference to the research question. It will also examine the methods used and their benefits as well as ethical considerations with the associated research methods.

1.2 MIXED METHODS RESEARCH:

"Quantitative research often seeks through measurement to test hypotheses, to determine outcomes and to draw generalizable conclusions... Qualitative research tends to be interpretivist and seeks to understand a phenomenon in its context in greater depth" (Lietz, Zayas, 2010). Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) define mixed methods research "as research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry" (p. 4). According to Bryman (2006) it is becoming increasingly common to use mixed methods research in recent years (p. 97). Creswell, Fetters and Ivankova (2004) believe that "[w]hen used in combination, both quantitative and qualitative data yield a more complete analysis, and they complement each other" (p. 7).

This thesis will use both quantitative and qualitative research methods to achieve complete and complementary data. Social media is regarded as having been an important tool in the 2020 general election in Ireland. In order to gain an insight into each party's performance on social media and the public's opinion of the party, the social media account metrics of each party formed the basis for the quantitative research. The qualitative research of this thesis will take two forms: content analysis of party manifestos and interviews with party members and industry professionals.

1.2.1 QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH:

The quantitative research methods used in this project will be through social media analytics platforms Socialbakers and CrowdTangle. Socialbakers boasts "the largest social media data-set in the industry" (Socialbakers, 2020). It is primarily used as a "social media marketing partner" (Socialbakers, 2020). However, its ability to monitor "over 8 million business profiles across all major platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, Google+ and VK.com" (Socialbakers, 2020) made it an asset in the research for this thesis. As a result, a comprehensive analysis of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter was conducted on the profiles of Sinn Féin, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Computer programs such as Socialbakers and CrowdTangle "substitute rapid and comprehensive searching supported by software for the uncertain and slow process of manual searching and filing" (Basit, 2003, p. 145).

In order to understand any trends and/ or new tactics employed by each chosen political party, a period of six months prior to the general election was examined. The decision was taken to examine the three political parties in Ireland who received the most first-preference votes in the 2020 election: Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil have held a majority in the Irish government since 1927. Much like the political situations of Spain and Greece, in 2020 Sinn Féin was in a position to challenge the long-held majority of these established political parties in Ireland. Public following of certain pages and reactions to social media posts can help to indicate public opinion of the associated political parties. In determining what party was the most popular in this regard, it is possible to discern what social media tactics seem to have been more effective than others and who these tactics were used by.

On Socialbakers, the custom timeline, 4 August 2019 (week beginning) until 8 February 2020 was selected. The profile of each party's social media account on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were added. Once generated, a report can be downloaded directly from the website. Different categories are included depending

on the social media platform. For example, for Facebook accounts, the following data is available: average interactions per post, evolution of interactions, average most engaging post types, user activity, number of interactions per 100 fans, number of page posts, number of fan posts, most engaging posts overview, growth of total fans, share of posts, share of interactions, socially devoted and response time segments for user. It also provides insights on the posts created by each party and it will inform the researcher of the top six posts within the given timeframe. If the post in question is a video, it is possible to see how many views the video received. It is also possible to view the comments on each post and organise these comments into the most reacted to. It is possible to view these posts directly through Facebook. However, the option of 'most relevant' comments available directly through Facebook is subjective because the comments from users you may have a connection with will appear first. Socialbakers displays the most popular/ most reacted to comments, thus making it possible to objectively examine the public reaction to the posts of each account.

CrowdTangle is operated in a similar way to Socialbakers and provides similar data but for Facebook and Instagram only. The main difference for this research was the ability of CrowdTangle to produce reports with the reactions broken down into the six possible categories: like (👍), love (❤️), haha (😂), sad (😢) wow (😮), and angry (😠). Therefore it was possible to discern the amount of positive versus negative responses to each post. CrowdTangle was also used to obtain data on follower-changes (which account had the most/ least followers at the start of the six month timeline and who gained the most/ least followers prior to election day).

"The user must still create the categories, do segmenting and coding, and decide what to retrieve and collate" (Basit, 2003, p. 145). Due to the large amount of information available from both Socialbakers and CrowdTangle, it was necessary to refine the results into relevant categories. For the purpose of this research, the following category results were gathered and analysed for the Facebook accounts of Sinn Féin, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil from 4 August 2019 to 8 February 2020: page likes, total interactions, reactions (broken down into like, angry, love, sad, haha,

wow), comments, shares, post-count, video post count, total owned video views, average views per video. Pages likes are the amount of likes the page received. Interactions refer to the total amount of comments, shares and reactions for a post. It is possible to select six different types of reactions from like to wow. Post-count and video post-count refer to the total number of posts and videos posted respectively during the time frame. Average views per video was not a category in the downloaded reports but was possible by dividing the total number of views by the amount of videos posted.

Instagram and Twitter do not allow for the same range of data to be gathered due to the smaller number of options available to a user when reacting to a post. For Instagram, the results were organised into the following categories: followers, follower-growth, post-count, video post-count, likes, comments, video views, total interactions, interactions per post. It was not possible to categorise the reactions into positive versus negative due to the fact that the only reaction available apart from commenting is to like a post. Therefore, the sole purpose of analysing each party's Instagram and Twitter accounts was to examine which party had the highest following on the platform. Please see Appendices A- E for the breakdown of each result category for all three parties and their leaders on each platform.

A content analysis was performed on each party manifesto to inform the research as to the rhetoric used by each party and the habits of each party to criticise other parties, self-endorse or lay out its programme for government. A search for certain words was also run, the full list can be found in Appendix F. During the content analysis phase, certain words seemed to be repeated more often in some manifestos than others. As a result, lexical trends began to appear and were categorised accordingly. Basit (2003) writes "Coding or categorizing the data has an important role in analysis. It involves subdividing the data as well as assigning categories" (p. 144). As well as performing word searches to determine any specific type of rhetoric, each sentence was categorised into one of three categories: self-endorsement, criticism of other parties/ the current situation in Ireland, priorities once in government. Once this was done, the total of each was divided into the word count

to discern each party's propensity percentage- wise towards each of the categories. Key Word in Context (KWC) analysis using the word as the unit of analysis was performed.

1.2.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:

"Qualitative methods are often regarded as providing rich data about real life people and situations, and being more able to make sense of behaviour and to understand behaviour within its wider context" (De Vaus, 2014, p. 6). For this project, the main forms of qualitative research will be obtained through content analysis and interviews.

Fernandez-García and Luengo (2018) performed a content analysis of party manifestos in 2018 to gauge whether or not a group of parties ascribed to core elements of 'populism'. The manifestos of the parties in question were examined regarding the presence of "an intense anti-establishment discourse (one of the core elements of populism)" (Garcia, Lueno, 2018, p. 60). Sinn Féin was one of the four parties and was the highest out of four for its anti-establishment rhetoric.

The research for this thesis was performed on the newest manifestos of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin to discern which party contained the highest amount of anti-establishment rhetoric. Sinn Féin topped this list as well as Garcia and Luengo's. The layout of each manifesto was also studied in order to examine the simplicity or complexity of the manner in which each party informed the public of its proposed programme of government. A content analysis was performed on the three manifestos to compare and contrast key policies in health and housing.

Interviews were conducted with industry-leading journalists, a political scientist and a member of the Sinn Féin party who held the position of Director of Elections for the previous general election in 2016 and is the party's current Spokesperson for

Agriculture. Each interview was recorded with the permission of the participant and a transcript was produced in each case. Due to added restrictions as a result of COVID-19, each interview was conducted over the phone. The resulting commentaries helped to form the basis of the thesis by contextualising the environment in Ireland that allowed Sinn Féin to rise in popularity in the manner it did. Interviewing a party member who has been closely involved in election campaigning provided valuable insights into changes in campaign strategies and use of social media platforms. Speaking with a political scientist with direct oversight of post-election data revealed insights into why the electorate voted the way it did. From reporting on events throughout the campaign and in the preceding years, the interviews which were conducted with political journalists were valuable by providing insights into what they believed had an effect on the Irish electorate in this regard.

Interviewing as a form of qualitative research "is a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experiences." (Rabionet, 2011, p. 563). Berg (2009) believes "the interview must rely on the establishment and maintenance of good rapport" (p. 130). In order to do this, he has written his interpretation of the ten commandments of interviewing which will be discussed in the next section.

1.3 PREPARATION:

For the purpose of this thesis, interviews were semi-structured and the following ten steps were consulted prior to each interview. A series of questions were composed ahead of each interview. The semi-structured interview "involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and special topics but the interviewers are allowed the freedom to digress" (Berg, 2009, p. 107). Berg (2009) has written what he describes as the "basic rules for conducting a decent interview" (p. 143). These rules were consulted in preparation for each interview:

1. Never begin an interview cold

2. Remember your purpose

3. Present a natural front

4. Demonstrate aware hearing

5. Think about appearance

6. Interview in a comfortable place

7. Don't be satisfied with monosyllabic answers

8. Be respectful

9. Practice, practice, and practice some more

10. Be cordial and appreciative

(Berg, 2009, pp. 143-144)

Each participant was in a location of their choosing. Regardless of being in person or over the phone, the appearance of objectivity and professionalism should always be maintained. Ahead of each interview, the participant was sent an information sheet explaining the associated research question. The structure of the interview was outlined and it was made explicitly clear that the option to cease the interview at any point without giving a reason was available to the participant. Each participant signed a consent form before or after the interview. A list of questions was composed specifically with the participant's area of expertise in mind ahead of the interview and where requested, sent to the participant to ensure they were comfortable with the area of discussion.

1.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Potential ethical implications were considered for this project. In 'Ethics in Qualitative Research', Orb, Eisenhower and Wynaden (2001) state that despite the conflict between the research of a project and the rights of its participants "the protection of human subjects or participants in any research study is imperative" (p. 93).

For this research, obtaining informed consent from interview participants was imperative to avoid ethical issues. As the interviews were recorded, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) considerations were included in the consent forms signed by the participants stating that the recordings only be held for up to three years and consent can be withdrawn at any point if so wished by the participant. Anonymity was not a clause in the consent forms for the interviews for this research which was made clear to participants in the participant information sheet. Orb, Eisenhower and Wynaden (2001), consider the relationship between the researcher and participant and the power structures that can come into play (p. 93). As a result, for this research attempts were consistently made to avoid exploiting participants. It was also imperative to remain objective at all points throughout the research for this thesis.

1.5 CONCLUSION

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were necessary for the associated thesis. It was necessary to gain figures and data related to each political party. As well as research conducted specifically for this thesis, it was necessary to obtain the figures of opinion polls prior to the election and the election results themselves. The interviews which were conducted in conjunction with the collected data contextualised the results and party-performance on social media platforms and in opinion polls. A fuller picture of the electorate, problem policy areas and recent events was gained by engaging in interviews. As well as this, a more comprehensive view of the campaign strategy of Sinn Féin was made clearer.

CHAPTER IV – ANALYSIS

1.1 ELECTION RESULTS:

On 8 February 2020, a general election was held in Ireland. 160 seats were filled in 39 constituencies across the country with a 62.9% national turnout. Ireland operates under a single vote transfer system in its general elections. Out of the first preference votes, Sinn Féin received 24.53%, Fianna Fáil received 22.18%, Fine Gael won 20.86% and Labour won 4.4% (*The Irish Times*, 2020). In the previous general election in Ireland in 2016, Fine Gael received the most number of first-preference votes with 25.52%. Fianna Fáil received 24.35%, Sinn Féin received 13.85% and Labour received 6.61% of first-preference votes (*The Irish Times*, 2016).
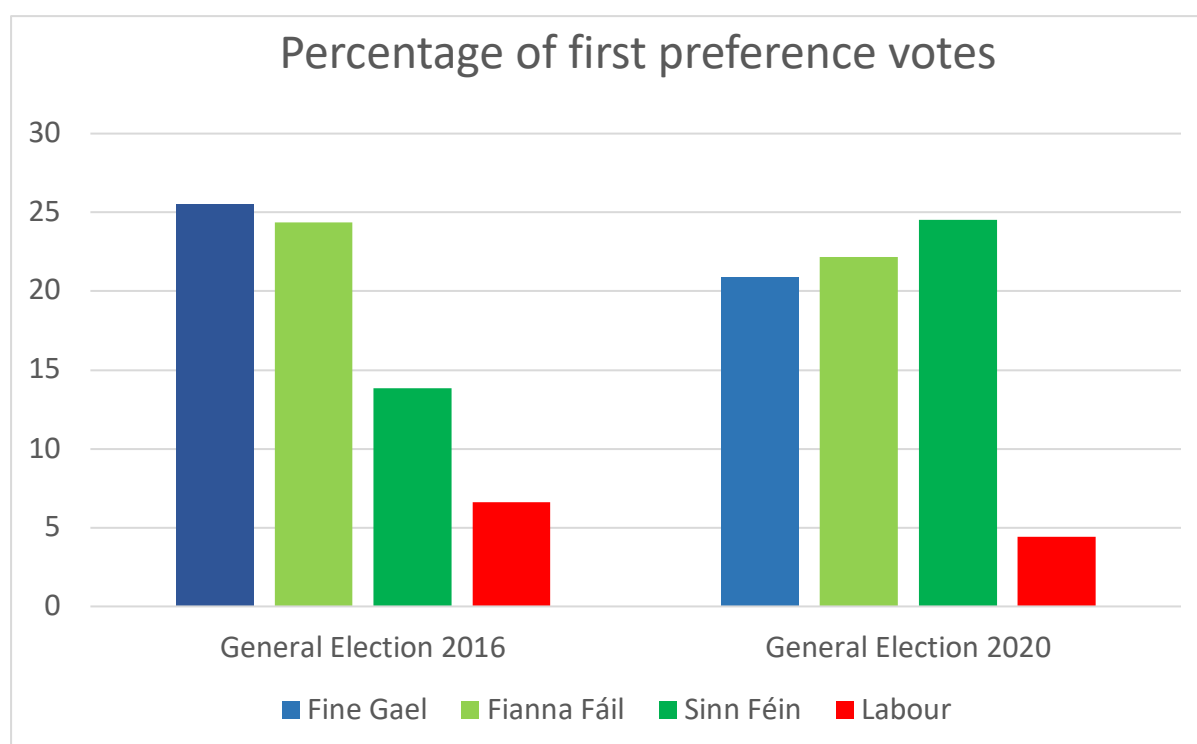
Figure 3: % of first preference votes in 2016 and 2010

On 24 May 2019, local and European elections were held in Ireland as well as a referendum on easing the restrictions of divorce. For the local elections, 949 seats were to be filled and there was a 50.2% electoral turnout on the day. Fine Gael received 25.2% of the first preference votes, Fianna Fáil received 26.9%, Sinn Féin

received 9.5% and Labour received 5.7%. Since the previous local election in 2014, Fine Gael's first-preference vote-share increased by 1.3% and Fianna Fáil's increased by 1.6%. Sinn Féin and Labour both lost first preference votes by 5.8% and 1.4% respectively (*The Irish Times*, 2019). 13 seats were filled on the same day for the European election for which there was a 49.7% voter-turnout. Out of the seats assigned, Fine Gael received 29.6% of the first-preference votes, Fianna Fáil received 16.5%, Sinn Féin won 11.7% and Labour won 3.1%. Fine Gael was the only party out of the aforementioned four with an increased first preference vote-share since the 2014 local and European elections with an added 7.3%. Compared to 2014, Fianna Fáil received 5.8% less first preference votes, Sinn Féin lost 7.8% and the Labour party lost 2.2%.

1.2 IPSOS MRBI POLITICAL OPINION POLLS:

Sinn Féin's turnaround in public support between the local and European elections in May 2019 and the general election in February 2020 was substantial and has been a point of conversation and debate throughout and after the election campaign. On 15 October 2019, an Ipsos MRBI political opinion poll was released. Fine Gael was in the lead with 29% party support, Fianna Fáil was in second place with 25%, Sinn Féin was in third place with 14% and Labour was in fourth place with 6% (*The Irish Times*/ Ipsos MRBI, 2019). In terms of party leadership, as well as his party, Leo Varadkar (Fine Gael) was in first place with a rating of 51% satisfaction, Micheál Martin (Fianna Fáil) received 38%, Mary Lou McDonald (Sinn Féin) was in third place with 30% and Brendan Howlin (Labour) received 20%. On 14 January 2020, the then incumbent Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced a general election was to be held on 8 February. Another Ipsos MRBI political opinion poll was conducted and was released on 20 January which publicly saw the beginning of Sinn Féin's turnaround. Fine Gael received 21%, Fianna Fáil received 25%, Sinn Féin rose by 7% to 21% party-support and Labour received 5% (Leahy, 2020a).

Two weeks later, Ipsos MRBI released a second political opinion poll in which the three main parties for the election were identified. The poll had a margin of error of

2.8% and placed Sinn Féin ahead of both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil with 25% party support (Leahy, 2020b). Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil received 20% and 23% respectively. In the leader approval rating section of the report, between 20 January and 3 February, Mary Lou McDonald went from 34% to 41%, Leo Varadkar went from 35% to 30% and Micheál Martin went from 33% to 30%, placing Mary Lou McDonald in first place, along with the Sinn Féin Party (Leahy, 2020b).

1.3 RESULTS: SOCIAL MEDIA:

Dr Jane Suiter, Associate Professor at Dublin City University, has been part of a team conducting a report on how Ireland voted in the 2020 election which is due for release in September 2020. In an interview with Pat Kenny on 25 May 2020, she identified the three main social media outlets used by political parties during the 2020 election campaigns as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Suiter described Twitter during election campaigns as a medium mostly used by journalists, media professionals and political analysts whereas "Facebook is more where ordinary people live or Instagram if you're younger" (*The Pat Kenny Show*, 2020). For the purpose of this thesis, Facebook and Instagram data from the three main parties and their leaders was analysed using data obtained from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers. Twitter data was researched through Socialbakers only. Out of the three platforms analysed Facebook garnered more activity in general among the public sphere during the election campaign. As a result, particular emphasis will be put on Facebook henceforth.

1.3.1 SINN FÉIN:

A number of quantitative analysis reports were generated for the Facebook, Instagram and Twitter profiles of Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The results of this showed that in the six months prior (up to and including) the general election on 8 February 2020, Sinn Féin's Facebook following and interaction was much higher than that of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Trends on the types of posts and activity on and by these three pages began to emerge during this analysis.

The date range was set to the week beginning 4 August 2019 and election day 8 February 2020 and the data can be viewed in Appendix A. In this time, Sinn Féin shared a total of 415 posts. It received 477,095 reactions, 61,163 comments and 212,100 shares. During the six-month time period, Sinn Féin's Facebook followers went from 162,706 on the week beginning 4 August 2019 to 189,705 by election day which is a total increase of 26,999 users and 17% of its original following. During this time, it posted 328 owned video posts which received a total of 13,620,905 views (Table 1, 2020, Appendix A). This averages at 41, 527 views per video. According to Facebook's page transparency Ad Library the Sinn Féin party spent a total of €50,127 on Facebook advertisements from March 2019 to June 2020 (Ad Library, 2020c).

Facebook reactions are categorised under six different headings: Likes (👍), Angry (😡), Haha (😂), Wow (😮), Sad (😢) and Love (❤️). In the context of the political sphere in Ireland in the six month timeframe, likes and love reactions tended to be positive, while angry, haha, wow and sad tended to be negative reactions. For the purposes of this thesis, they were categorised as such. During the six-month timeframe, in response to its posts Sinn Féin received 97% positive reactions and 3% negative reactions (Table 1.1, 2020, Appendix A).
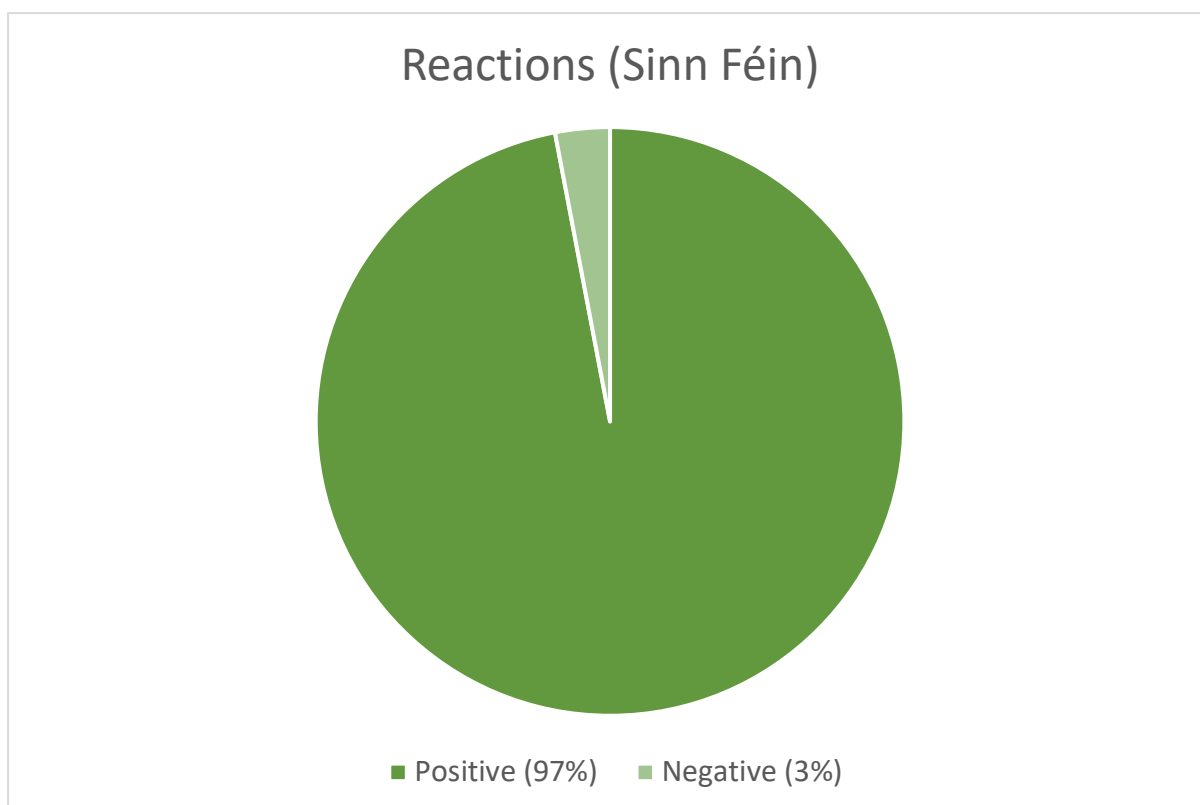
Figure 4: % of positive versus negative Facebook reactions- Sinn Féin

The Sinn Féin party Instagram profile gained 9,794 additional followers from 4 August 2019 to 8 February 2020. By election day, the account's following was 25,356. In January, the account's following increased by 40%, the highest increase in the six-month time frame. From 1 February to 8 February, Sinn Féin's Instagram account increased by 24% of the total increase in these six months. The account garnered a total of 88,745 interactions in total which averaged at 5,941 interactions per post. The highest amount was received in January when the page saw 25,109 interactions. In total, the account received 86,984 likes and 1,761 comments on its 117 posts. The account posted 32 videos which received a total of 122,589 views (Table 3, 2020, Appendix C). This is an average of 3,831 views per video posted. Instagram does not feature the categoric reaction options that Facebook does. Therefor the positive versus negative percentage-analysis performed on Sinn Féin's Facebook posts was not possible to perform on its Instagram posts.

From 4 August 2019 to 8 February 2020 Sinn Féin's Twitter account gained 17,519 followers with the most it gained in a single day occurring on 8 February, election

day. During this time, it tweeted 1,810 times. It received a total of 325,892 interactions which included 240,160 likes, 5,591 replies and 80,141 retweets. The account was mentioned in tweets by other users 52,034 times (Table 5, 2020, Appendix E).

In the local and European Elections on 24 May 2019, Sinn Féin performed poorly. Its social media performance was mixed. In the six months before the elections Sinn Féin's Facebook following went from 156,645 to 161,488 which is a total increase of 3% of its original following (compared to a 17% increase before the 2020 election). It put up 565 posts which received 249,911 interactions in total. In the month prior to the election, the account saw a 19.85% decrease in interactions. In total, it received 21,500 comments and 84,106 shares, 35% and 40% lower respectively than the amount of comments and shares it received ahead of the 2020 election. Of its post-count, 497 were videos which achieved 5,532,444 views which is an average of 11,132 views per video, 30,395 less views per video than in the six months leading up to the 2020 election (Table 1.2, 2020, Appendix A). Despite this difference in performance, reactions to Sinn Féin's Facebook posts were largely positive. Out of 144,305 reactions 96% were positive and 4% were negative (Table 1.3, 2020, Appendix A).

1.3.2 MARY LOU MCDONALD:

The same six-month timeline beginning on the week of 4 August 2019 to the general election on 8 February was applied to the analytics of the Facebook and Instagram accounts of the leaders of each of the three main parties. Mary Lou McDonald has been the leader of the Sinn Féin party since Gerry Adams reneged the title in February 2018. She has a larger Facebook following than that of the leaders of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. On 4 August 2019, McDonald's public page had 99,932 likes. By election day 2020, the account had 116,660 likes which is an increase of 17% of its original following. In this amount of time, there were 213 post which received a total of 174,210 interactions. In total, McDonald's page received 28,399

comments and 41,382 shares. Its posts received 204,429 reactions which were 98% positive and 2% negative (Table 2.1, 2020, Appendix B).
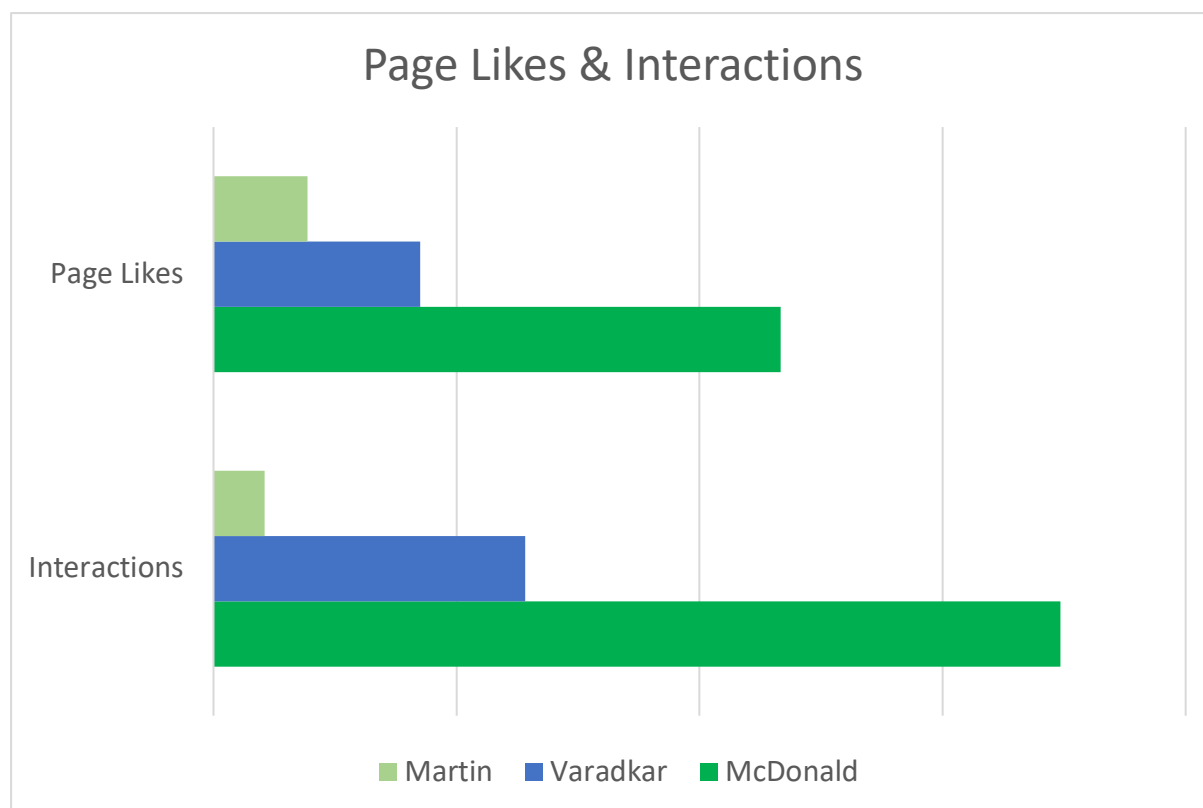
Figure 5: page likes and interactions of Martin, Varadkar and McDonald

McDonald's Instagram account is much less active than her Facebook account. By election day, her account had 3,505 followers. McDonald's post-count is 17 for the six months prior to 8 February 2020. She had a total of 4,429 interactions, 4,303 of which were likes and 126 were comments. She did not post any videos, therefor her video views for the timeline is 0 (Table 4, 2020, Appendix D).

1.3.3 FINE GAEL:

Fine Gael's Facebook following went from 37,278 on the week beginning 4 August 2019 to 38,158 by 8 February 2020 which is a total increase of 880, 3% of that of Sinn Féin's. During this time, Fine Gael had a total post count of 84. These posts received a total of 28,064 comments and 5,178 shares. The account posted 49 videos totalling in 2,420,572 views (Table 1.4, 2020, Appendix A). This is an average

of 49,3999 views per video, an average of 7,872 more views per video than that of the Sinn Féin account. Facebook's ad transparency has disclosed that from March 2019 to June 2020, Fine Gael spent €111,979 on paid Facebook advertisements (Ad Library, 2020b). In total, the Fine Gael account received 34,329 reactions in the six month timeframe before the 2020 election, 60% of which were positive and 40% of which were negative (Table 1.5, 2020, Appendix A).
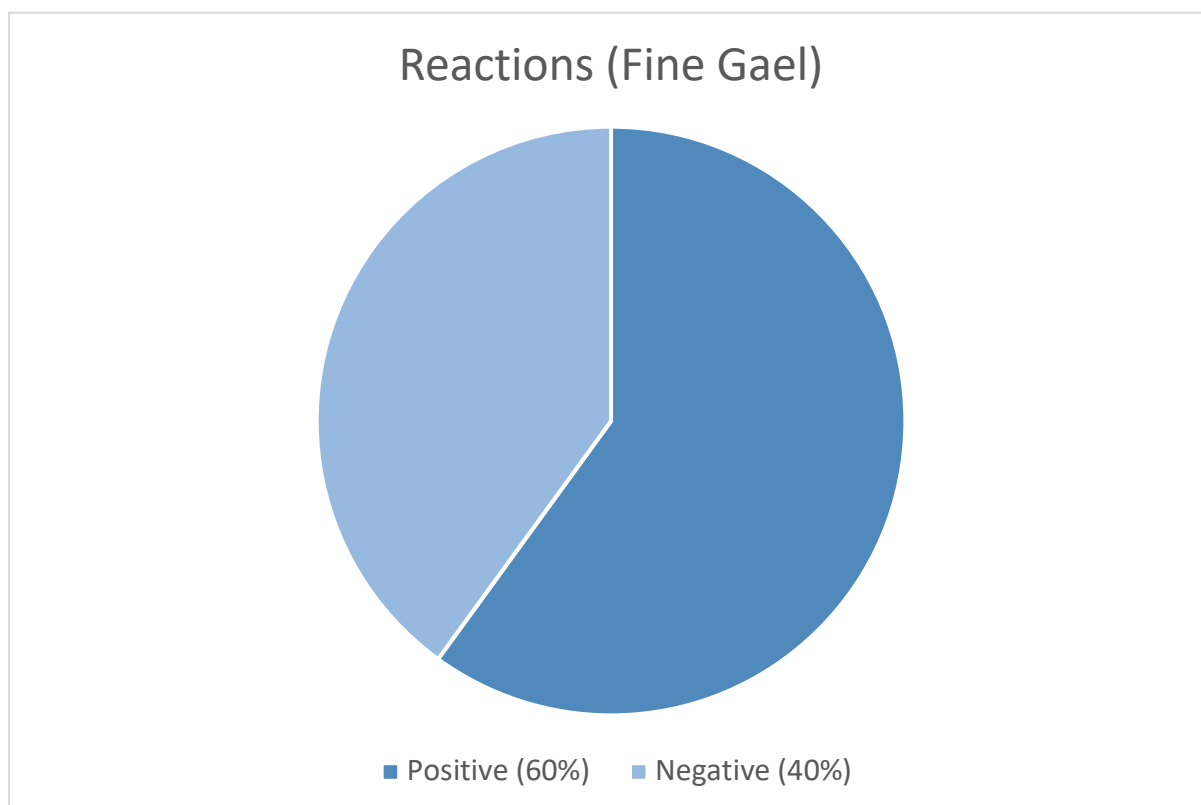
Figure 6: % of positive versus negative Facebook reactions- Fine Gael

From the week beginning 4 August to election-day, Fine Gael's Instagram account gained a total of 1,051 followers which brought the account up to 3,825 followers by election day. 47% of its additional followers occurred in January 2020 and 24% in the week prior to election day. In the date range, it had a total post-count of 49, receiving 5,573 likes and 395 comments which is an average of 720 interactions per post. It posted a total of 31 videos for which it enjoyed 33,214 views (Table 3.1, 2020, appendix C). This is an average of 1,071 views per video posted.

From 4 August 2019 to 8 February 2020, Fine Gael's Twitter following increased by 4,226 users. The highest number of follows in a single day was 193 follows on 22 January 2020. The account tweeted 540 times in the six month period ahead of the general election and received a total of 23,358 interactions of which 20,731 were likes, 805 were comments and 6,822 were retweets. The account was mentioned 43,834 times in these six months in tweets by other Twitter users (Table 5.1, 2020, Appendix E).

1.3.4 LEO VARADKAR:

Leo Varadkar has been the leader of Fine Gael and Taoiseach since June 2017. Between the week beginning 4 August 2019 and election day, Varadkar's Facebook following increased from 39,394 to 42,580 likes which is an 8% increase. During this time, the account saw a total of 64,173 interactions on a total of 77 posts. This includes 24,157 comments, 4,339 shares and 35,677 reactions. The highest rate of interactions occurred in the week prior to the election with 11 posts garnering 16,355 interactions which was just over 25% of the page's total interactions from the six month period in just one week (Table 2.2, 2020, Appendix B). Of the total reactions to Varadkar's posts, 75% were positive and 25% were negative (Table 2.3, 2020, Appendix B).

Varadkar's Instagram-following was the strongest out of the three leaders in the six months leading up to the election. By election day, Varadkar had 24,792 followers. The total post-count was 46 of which 15 were videos. The account saw a total of 51,864 interactions with the highest amount occurring in September 2019. During this month, Varadkar's highest interaction-rate was on 25 September when he posted a photo with Jimmy Fallon while he was on a trip to promote investment opportunities between Ireland and the US. Of the total 51,864 interactions during the six months, 49,093 were likes and 2,771 were comments (Table 4.1, 2020, Appendix D). The account posted 15 videos which obtained 151,152 views which is an average of 10,077 views per video.

1.3.5 FIANNA FÁIL:

Fianna Fáil's Facebook page went from having 37,552 likes on 4 August 2019 to 38,564 by 8 February 2020 which is an addition of 2.7% of its original following. In this timeframe, the account had a total post-count of 175 which obtained a total of 64,711 interactions. Out of the 175 posts, 116 of them featured videos. In total, these videos received 3,708,253 views which is an average of 31,968 views per video, the lowest average out of the three parties analysed (Table 1.6, 2020, Appendix A). The party paid €95,740 in advertisements from March 2019 to June 2020 (Ad Library, 2020a). The aforementioned 175 posts received a total of 22,391 comments and 7,039 shares. There were 35,281 reaction responses of which 68% were positive and 32% were negative (Table 1.7, 2020, Appendix A).
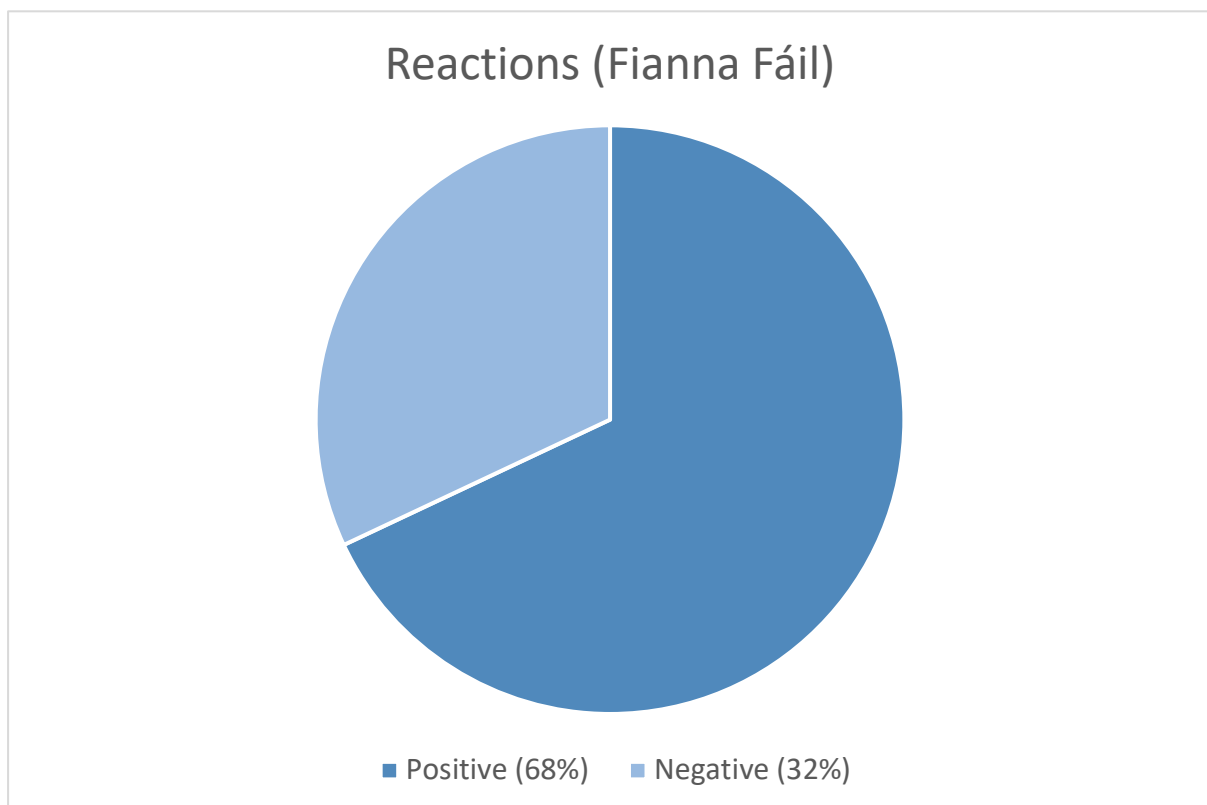
Figure 7: % of positive versus negative Facebook reactions- Sinn Féin

From 4 August 2019 to 8 February 2020, Fianna Fáil's Instagram account gained a total of 4,274 followers. It gained an additional 563 followers in the month of January which was its largest in this timeframe and nearly 44% of its total additional followers. The account had a total post-count of 98 which generated 5,945 likes and

275 comments. Of the 98 posts, 49 of them featured videos (Table 3.2, 2020, Appendix C). The page's total video views was 23,805 which is an average of 486 views per video.
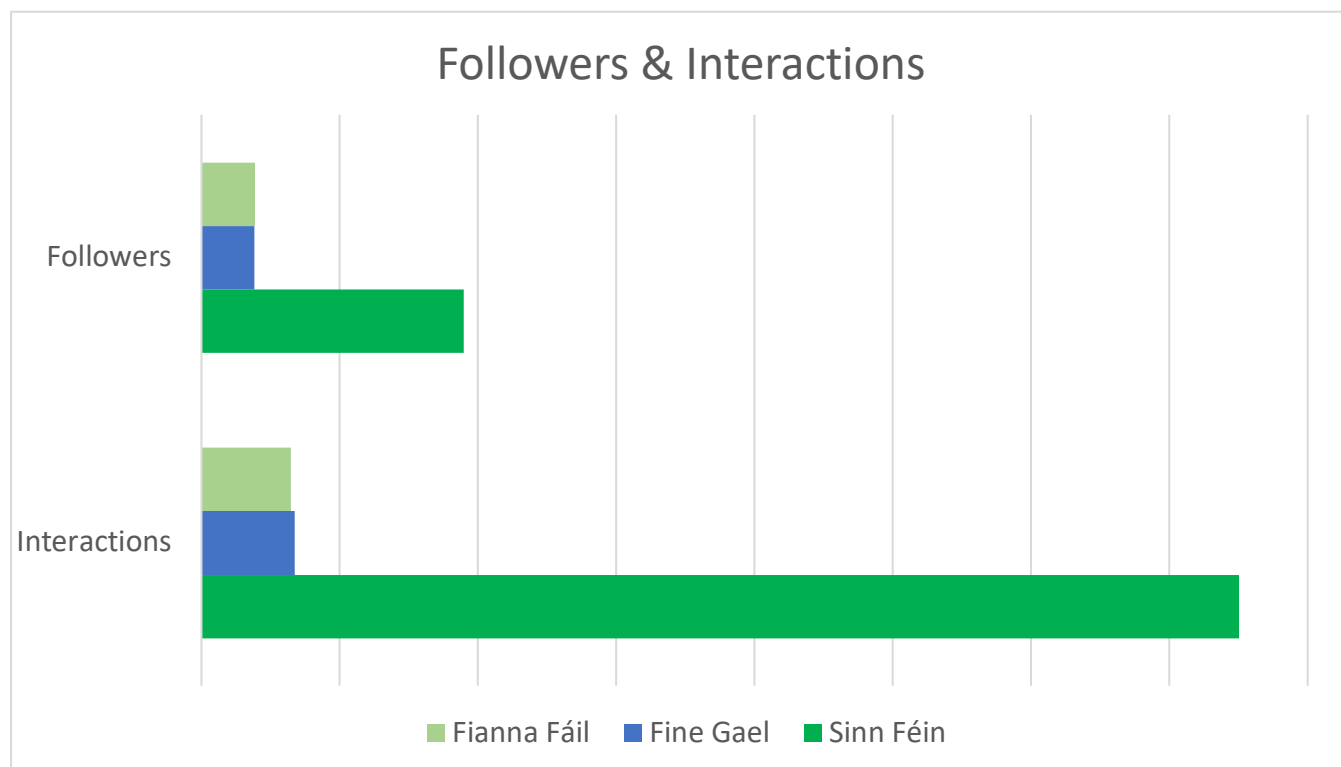
Figure 8: party Instagram followers and interactions

Fianna Fáil's Twitter following increased by 4,277 users between 4 August 2019 and 8 February 2020. The account put up 886 tweets in this time which had a total of 19,946 interactions- 13,253 likes, 1,250 replies and 5,443 retweets. The Fianna Fáil Twitter account was mentioned 23,329 times by other Twitter users in this timeframe. Its most engaging tweet was on 14 January 2020 when it received 254 likes, 111 retweets and zero replies (Table 5.2, 2020, appendix E).

1.3.6 MICHEÁL MARTIN:

Micheál Martin succeeded Brian Cowen as leader of Fianna Fáil in January 2011. He became Taoiseach of Ireland in June 2020. In comparison with McDonald and Varadkar, he has a modest Facebook following and set up his Instagram account in

January 2020. As a result, the metrics for his Instagram account are only possible to obtain for January and February for the purpose of this analysis.

In the six months prior to the election, Martin's Facebook page likes increased by just over 2% from 18,825 to 19,295 which is a total increase of 470 likes. The account had a total of 46 posts which generated 10,445 interactions which included 3,122 comments, 809 shares and 6,514 reactions. 89% of the reactions on Martin's account were positive and 11% were negative. During this timeframe, the account posted 29 videos which garnered 228,541 views (Table 2.4, 2020, Appendix B). This is an average of 7,881 views per video.

Martin's Instagram account was set up in January 2020. By election day in February, his account had 1,234 followers. Martin's account posted a total of 12 times before election day. 5 of these posts were videos which generated a total of 5,332 views. In total, the 12 posts received 1,557 interactions, including 1,488 likes and 69 comments (Table 4.2, 2020, appendix D).

1.4 MANIFESTOS:

1.4.1 LEXICAL TRENDS

A content analysis was performed on the manifestos of Sinn Féin , Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to examine any trends present in the manner in which they presented their policies and to decipher key policies in health and housing. Excluding page numbers and heading templates, the word count of the three part manifestos were as follows: Fine Gael had the highest word count with approximately 49,507 words, Sinn Féin had the second highest with approximately 47,804 words and Fianna Fáil's manifesto had roughly 39,492 words (Table 6, 2020, Appendix F). A full table of the following word-usage analysis is available in Table 6.1, Appendix F. Sinn Féin mentioned its own party name 451 times. It mentioned Fine Gael directly 49 times and Fianna Fáil directly 42 times. It also referred to them as 'successive (Irish) governments/ administrations' seven times and used the phrase 'Fine Gael

supported by Fianna Fáil' and vice versa five times. Fianna Fáil used its own party name 129 times in total in its manifesto. It referred to Fine Gael directly 41 times and it did not refer to 'Sinn Féin' at all. Fine Gael used its own party name 210 times, referred to Fianna Fáil directly eight times and did not refer to Sinn Féin at all.

Words that appear often in Sinn Féin's manifesto and not as often in those of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were 'workers', derivatives of 'failure', derivatives of 'equal' and 'inequal', 'power', 'insurance', 'free', 'privatisation', 'investment' and 'underfunded'/ 'underfunding'. Sinn Féin also referred to 'banks', 'bankers' and 'banking' 74% more frequently than Fianna Fáil and 62% more often than Fine Gael. There is a sense of urgency in Sinn Féin and Fine Gael's manifestos through the use of words such as 'immediate', 'immediately', 'urgent' 'urgently' and 'now'. This same sense of urgency is not as pervasive in Fianna Fáil's manifesto. Fianna Fáil were also the most likely to use the word 'citizen(s)' and the least likely to use the word 'people'. While Sinn Féin was the most likely to use the word 'people' and the least likely to use the word 'citizen(s)'. Sinn Féin used the words 'child', 'children', 'disability' and 'disabilities' 27% more than Fianna Fáil and 44% more than Fine Gael.

Despite frequently posting about Brexit on its social media, Sinn Féin mentions it the least out the three parties in its manifesto. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael both mention 'Brexit' 39 times while Sinn Féin mentions it 24 times. Fianna Fáil refers to the European Union 104 times which is more than Fine Gael and Sinn Féin refer to it combined (38 and 56 times respectively). Sinn Féin also refers to 'community', 'communities' and 'rural' the least out of all three parties and 'business' and 'businesses' the most. Fine Gael refers to 'landlord(s)' and 'welfare' more frequently than Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. They also refer to 'Travellers' the least while Sinn Féin refers to Travellers the most out of the three parties. Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin use the word 'crisis' 27 and 28 times respectively while Fine Gael only refers to it eight times.

A content analysis was also performed to examine how often each party spent

1. Criticising other parties/ situations in Ireland.
2. Endorsing its own party.
3. Setting out its priorities and government agendas.

It was found that Sinn Féin's manifesto spends approximately 20% of its word count criticising Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil spend 12.5% of its word count criticising other political parties while Fine Gael spend approximately 2% of its manifesto criticising other political parties. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's criticisms are mostly aimed at each other and neither party acknowledge Sinn Féin. Fine Gael's manifesto is made up of approximately 21% self-endorsements while approximately 2% and 3% of that of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil's manifestos respectively are comprised of such. Each party spends the majority of its word count outlining its political agenda with Fianna Fáil discussing it the most (85%), Fine Gael the least (77%) and Sinn Féin in the middle (78%) (Table 6, 2020, Appendix F).

The layout of each manifesto was another point of interest. The layout of the Sinn Féin manifesto appears to be the simplest. Excluding the foreword, each subsequent section is comprised of a title, a single block of text outlining current issues and Sinn Féin's solutions for these issues, followed by a section at the end of bullet points highlighting both the solutions put forward and in many cases the reasons behind them. The manifesto is written in Open sans in font size 11 (Sinn Féin, 2020). Excluding the foreword, Fianna Fáil's manifesto is mostly made up of two columns of text per page. The priorities are organised into sections of bullet points mixed with blocks of text pertaining to the current situation of the issue at hand. Fianna Fáil's manifesto is in Circular Pro TT Book and is also in font size 11 (Fianna Fáil, 2020a).

Visually the most complex manifesto layout was that of Fine Gael. Most pages feature three columns of text in a smaller font than that of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil. The font used is Effra Light in font size 10.5 (Fine Gael, 2020) which is marginally smaller than those of Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. With this font being in 'Light', it is thinner than those of Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin and as a result it is more difficult to read. There are also pages throughout, for example pages 95 and 96, where the text

is white and appears on a strong-coloured background making it more difficult to read than black text on a white background which comprises most of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil's manifestos.

1.4.2 HEALTH AND HOUSING POLICIES

In an interview with the author on 1 July 2020, Political Scientist at the Department of Government in University College Cork, Dr Theresa Reidy references data from the Irish National Election study after the 2020 election and states that "health and housing were the two most important issues in the election". As a result, key health and housing policy-areas of the three parties were also examined.

Sinn Féin's solutions are mainly state-led. It (2020) proposes free healthcare and an "additional €4.5 billion for Current and €1.58 billion for Capital spending in our health services" (p. 45). The party (2020) highlight a number of benefits this would bring to the Irish public such as a statutory home-care scheme for the elderly; medical cards to be provided to all cancer-care patients; a "state-sponsored contraception scheme for women" (p. 46) and free hospital parking.

In terms of recruitment, Sinn Féin propose hiring 2,000 additional mental health staff, 2,500 nurses and midwives, 1,000 consultant doctors and 1,500 Primary Care Centre staff. The party (2020) also suggest a "moving home bursary" (p. 47) and a similar grant for international GPs who wish to move to Ireland. The party's manifesto (2020) also promises to purchase, equip and staff new air ambulances and 50 new ambulances to reduce the "long and dangerous waiting times" (p. 52) experienced by many communities.

To tackle the trolley and waiting-list crises Sinn Féin (2020) propose to invest "an extra €1 billion of capital and €480 million of current spending to increase the number of hospital beds" (p. 49) by 1,500 in their first term of Government. As well as hiring more health-care staff, Sinn Féin (2020) suggest introducing "Comhliosta, a

new and single Integrated Hospital Waiting List Management System" (p. 50) to tackle the waiting-list crisis.

At the fore of Sinn Féin's housing policies was a reduction in and freeze of rent for up to three years and a three-year refundable tax credit to "put a month's rent back in every renter's pocket" (Sinn Féin, 2020, p. 65) at a cost of €301 million. They (2020) vow to build over 100,000 public homes "on public land to meet social and affordable housing needs" (p. 63) by investing an additional €6.5 billion. Sinn Féin proposes increasing the vacant site levy from 7% to 15% to tackle land-hoarding. Sinn Féin also promise to abolish local property tax and reduce mortgage rates. They (2020) include a Residential Tenancies Bill to link rent reviews to the Consumer Price Index after the rent-freeze and introduce "an NCT style certification to ensure compliance with building and fire safety standards" (p. 66). Under this, they plan 25% of all private rental properties to be inspected by local authorities every year. There is no mention of supports for landlords.

Fine Gael's health policy lies mainly in the implementation of Sláintecare. The party plans to invest an additional €5 billion per year to into health-care services in Ireland. Through Sláintecare, Fine Gael promises to provide 2,600 extra hospital beds and 4,500 community beds. Fine Gael's manifesto also discusses recruiting "3,840 primary care workers, with recruitment of 1,000 by the end of this year" (p. 14). Fine Gael also promises to "provide new ambulance bases in Galway City, Mullingar, Cork, Limerick and Ardee" (p. 15).

In terms of recruitment, Fine Gael proposes 5,000 additional nurses. The party (2020) also mentions raising the pay and conditions of nurses and midwives "to the level of therapists" (p. 15). They commit to recruiting 1,000 frontline staff in 2020 including public health nurses and allied health professionals (occupational therapists, dementia advisers, speech and language therapists). The party vows to increase the number of GP training places to 300 by 2025 (the intake for 2019 was a total of 191). Fine Gael promises the recruitment of 1,000 consultants and the party

vows to ensure that hiring consultants will be contingent on their willingness to work in public hospitals (this feature will be implemented on a phased basis).

Fine Gael pledge to build 35,000- 40,000 new homes every year over the subsequent five years. This includes more 10,000 newly built homes "at affordable prices" (Fine Gael, 2020, p. 67). The party promises to increase the maximum Help To Buy refund to €30,000 for first time buyers and self-build properties valued up to €500,000. Regarding landlords, Fine Gael claims to be committed to a review of the tax treatment of landlords as a support for smaller landlords. They also plan to grant the Land Development Agency a firmer statutory basis and €1.25 billion in funding from the Irish Strategic Investment Fund.

Fine Gael (2020) plans to extend the Serviced Sites Fund to private lands where local authorities will fund building in "areas with a proven affordability challenge" (p. 70). These homes will be sold to owner occupiers at a discount of up to €50,000 which the owners will repay to the local authority "over time or upon the sale of the property" (Fine Gael, 2020, p. 70). Fine Gael (2020) also promise to legislate for 30% of homes built "to be made available for affordable purchase or cost rental" (p. 70) in addition to the current 10% minimum for social housing.

In their manifesto, Fianna Fáil detail healthcare policies which will cost €310 million in addition to pre-committed spending commitments. To combat the trolley crisis, Fianna Fáil (2020a) propose aiming for a "four-hour target wait for Emergency Departments" (p. 37). They also pledge to provide an additional 2,600 hospital beds. Fianna Fáil ensures that anyone waiting more than six months for a procedure will be able to apply to the National Treatment Purchase Fund (a fund they also promised to double to €200 million).

To combat the staffing difficulties in the healthcare sector, Fianna Fáil propose hiring 4,000 additional nursing staff (including 300 GP practice nurses and 350 public health nurses) over the next five years at a cost of €212 million. The party also plans to recruit 1,000 extra consultants over these five years at a cost of €223 million.

Fianna Fáil (2020a) will provide an "additional 20 emergency ambulances and 200 extra staff" (p. 38) which will cost €25.4 million. The party also pledges to increase GP training places to 274.

Fianna Fáil (2020a) proposes to build "200,000 new" (p. 56) homes by 2025 which would include 50,000 new build social housing units and 50,000 new affordable units. The party commits to expanding the Help to Buy Scheme funding by €100 million. They (2020a) pledge to improve the conditions for renters at a cost of €214.6 million. Among the proposed measures is an introduction of a €600 rent tax credit for all private renters, a National Rent Deposit Scheme with a "life time deposit" (Fianna Fáil, 2020a, p. 61), and a ban on co-living. In support of landlords, Fianna Fáil also plan to treat local property tax as a deductible expense.

Within the construction industry, Fianna Fáil (2020a) plan to "[t]arget 10,000 apprenticeship places in the construction sector per annum" (p. 58) at a cost of €45.5 million. The party (2020a) promises to introduce legislation to disable single buyers from bulk-purchasing entire developments unless they are designated Build to Rent homes and reduce development levies "to stimulate construction" (p. 58). Fianna Fáil also plan to launch a new €50 million Vacant Fund to bring vacant homes back into use.

All three parties' healthcare policies pertain to elements of Sláintecare and as a result, contain many similar policies. However, they also differ in many proposals. Sinn Féin seeks free healthcare. While Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil proposed more spending in healthcare and increased benefits for Irish citizens, they do not offer the same amount as a statutory right. All three parties include a provision for medical cards for patients of cancer and/ or terminal illnesses. All three promise to implement the Scally Reports and RCOG review but only Fine Gael and Sinn Féin mention implementing the MacCraith Review. Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin suggest implementing no-fry-zones for schools. Both Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil propose free hospital car parking while Fine Gael suggest capping it at €10 per day. Fine Gael and Sinn Féin commit to state-sponsored/ free contraception for women, which

Fianna Fáil does not. Fine Gael offer free dental care for children under the age of 16 and Sinn Féin offer it for children under the age of 18 which Fianna Fáil does not.

Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin both promote abolishing prescription charges while Fine Gael (2020) suggests "reducing" (p. 14) them. All three parties propose introducing home care as a statutory right. However, Sinn Féin proposes an extra 12 million home care hours while Fine Gael (2020) promote an additional one million plus one million "for every year that Fine Gael is in power" (p. 19) and Fianna Fáil support an extra five million. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil pledge to provide free GP for those under the age of 18 while Sinn Féin (2020) promotes free GP care for all citizens of Ireland to be rolled out "over a term of Government at a cost of over €455 million" (p. 47). All three parties include provisions for IVF treatment. Sinn Féin and Fine Gael support the implementation of the Human Tissue Bill while Fianna Fáil does not mention it.

Sinn Féin, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil differ greatly in their housing policy-proposals. Sinn Féin's key housing strategy is a rent-freeze with a yearly tax rebate of up to €1,500. The party (2020) also proposes holding a referendum to "enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution" (p. 63). Neither Fine Gael nor Fianna Fáil mention this. Fianna Fáil offers a private renters tax credit of up to €600 but its housing policies mainly centre around the construction industry and increasing the appeal to build. The opening sentence of their housing policy section reads: "Fianna Fáil is the party that builds homes" (Fianna Fáil, 2020a, p. 56). Despite shouldering frequent criticism for rising house prices creating a generation of renters, Fine Gael (2020) commences their housing policy section by stating that "Fine Gael is the party of home ownership" (p. 66). The party (2020) states that the housing reform they wish to bring about in communities around Ireland will move from "developer-led planning to more sustainable plan-led development" (p. 70).

Fine Gael seems to be the most ambiguous out of the three parties in terms of housing policy-proposals. For example, they (2020) state that they will "continue and expand the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan for a further five years with sufficient

finance so more people can avail of it" (p. 66). However, they fail to inform the reader of the specifics of this-by how much do they plan to expand; how much qualifies as sufficient finance? The policies they outline also largely plan to 'continue' measures that are already in place. For example, Fine Gael (2020) discusses continuing services such as "the national Mortgage Arrears Resolution Service, Abhaile, which has helped more than 12,000 households at risk of losing their homes" (p. 67). The use of the word continue for an electorate who has seen a housing crisis grip the country and homeless figures continuously rise for the last number of years may hold negative connotations. This 'continuation' occurs on numerous occasions throughout the housing segment of the Fine Gael manifesto.

1.5 DISCUSSION: A SERIES OF FORTUNATE EVENTS FOR SINN FÉIN:

While it is possible that the opinion polls throughout the election may have acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy, there were also a series of events and factors which seem to have coincided with Sinn Féin's popularity-surges in these polls. On 15 October 2019, Sinn Féin's party-support was ranked at 14% among the public. By 20 January 2020, it had increased to 21% (*The Irish Times*/ Ipsos MRBI, 2020).

On 11 January, it was announced that the Northern Ireland Assembly would reopen "almost three years to the day after it and the power-sharing executive in the region collapsed" (McDonald, 2020). De Bréadún states that he believed the announcement of the reconvening of the Northern Assembly had "a certain influence that was positive in nature" on Sinn Féin's 2020 campaign. According to him, the reason behind this was that "[i]t deprived their opponents of an issue that they could have used to damage Sinn Féin in the campaign".

On 14 January 2020, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced that a general election was going to take place three and a half weeks later on 8 February. On the same day, a homeless man received life altering injuries when a Dublin City Council industrial vehicle scooped his tent up with him inside and deposited him in the back of a truck. In an interview with the author on 2 July 2020, *RTÉ Morning Ireland*

Presenter, Journalist and Author Rachael English (2020) states that she believes this event "set the tone for a lot of the campaign". A campaign poster of Eoghan Murphy, the incumbent Minster for Housing at the time, was placed on a poll directly above the site of this incident. It was removed the following day on 15 January which was announced by Murphy on Twitter: "My thoughts are with this poor man as he recovers in hospital. I've demanded a full report in to the incident which is under Garda investigation. My campaign poster which was located at the scene has been removed" (Murphy, 2020).

In the aftermath of this incident, the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar "called on the Fianna Fáil Lord Mayor of Dublin Paul McAuliffe to make a statement on the matter" (McGee, Kelly, 2020). As a result, Varadkar was accused of attempting to politicise the incident. Less than a week later on 20 January, the first Ipsos MRBI opinion poll of the 2020 campaign was released which showed Sinn Féin with 21% party-support (Leahy, 2020a). This was an increase of 6% and it placed the party on par with Fine Gael and 4% behind Fianna Fáil. According to English, henceforth it would become clear "that the momentum was in Sinn Fein's direction".

Another possible contributing factor to the party's increase in popularity was the exclusion of Sinn Féin from the leaders debate between Fine Gael's Leo Varadkar and Fianna Fáil's Micheál Martin. *Virgin Media News* claimed at the time that coverage ahead of the election was "allocated on the basis of party performance in the 2016 general election and the local elections in 2019" (Finn, 2020). However, due to their rise in popularity during the campaign, Sinn Féin leaders believed that they had a right to be part of the leaders debates with Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Una Mullaly (2020) wrote in the *Irish Times* that "voters are driven more by sentiment than detail, and in fact a party that threatens the establishment being attacked by that establishment may lure the Sinn Féin-curious". She (2020) discussed the legitimacy in the "power of the underdog" and how an "under-analysed aspect of the Irish electorate is devilment". Justine McCarthy and Stephen O'Brien (2020) of the *Sunday Times* echoed Mullaly's sentiments at the time and wrote that *Virgin Media*

News and *RTÉ's* decision to exclude Sinn Féin from the election debates "served only to bolster Sinn Féin's claim to be the lead voice against the establishment".

Reidy comments on Sinn Féin's willingness to go into coalition "not just as a senior partner but also as a junior partner". She believes this benefitted the party because all of a sudden "a vote for Sinn Fein was a vote for a party that was going into government". Both Varadkar and Martin expressed their refusal to going into coalition with Sinn Féin at different points throughout the campaign. McCarthy and O'Brien (2020) discuss how Sinn's Féin's claim to be the lead voice against the establishment "was further entrenched when Varadkar said during the *Virgin Media News* debate that he was open to entering a coalition with Fianna Fáil, while both the big parties said they would not participate in government with Sinn Féin".

This reluctance is attributed to ostensible 'shadowy figures' which Sinn Féin are believed to be at the helm of. During the campaign, Martin commented: "I could never be sure with Sinn Féin in terms of who you are dealing with. Is it unelected officials in Belfast who rule the roost, who control the levers of power within that party?" (cited in Carswell, 2020). In an interview with the author on 1 July, Journalist Una Mullally stated that this "constant commentary around their IRA past… does not impact Sinn Féin's vote because the people voting for Sinn Féin don't care about that, or if anything completely understand it and maybe see it in the past".

1.6 SINN FÉIN'S FRONT BENCH AND KEY POLICY-AREAS:

De Bréadún believes that the 2020 election was a media event. Of the Sinn Féin front-bench, he points out that "the impression was conveyed to people that these were articulate politicians – intelligent and socially-concerned". Dr Reidy believes that the appointment of Mary Lou McDonald was part of a "pathway to making the party seem like a more credible choice for government". She claims that McDonald's leadership helped by "moving the party away from its past and making a connection with a group of voters who would not have voted for the party while Gerry Adams was the leader".

The reception she received in the comments section on Sinn Féin's Facebook page were largely positive. For example, on 21 January, Sinn Féin posted a video of which the accompanying caption read "Uachtarán Shinn Féin [President of Sinn Féin], Mary Lou McDonald slams Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in a rousing speech in Dublin's Mansion House as Sinn Féin launches its Dáil election campaign" (Sinn Féin Ireland, 2020d). The top comment in the replies section was: "Thats what we all needed to hear, I got so excited listening as if it was happening, mary Lou McDonald you can say it louder but not any clearer, that was brilliant". De Bréadún describes her as "an accomplished media performer". Mullally echoes this and adds that another facet of this discussion is the question of how McDonald "compare[s] politically in a debate context next to Micheál Martin and Leo Varadkar". She comments on Varadkar's poor communication skills and says that despite Martin's affable personality, he is "this ghost of the crash in terms of his presence". Mullally believes that this combined with McDonald's "capacity to bundle Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil together" portrays her a strong female politician.

McDonald and her front bench potentially represent a generational shift within Sinn Féin. When consulted on this matter, De Bréadún posits that because she was never involved in the Troubles in Northern Ireland, "she wasn't vulnerable to the same kind of questioning and probing and allegations that were traditionally raised with people like Adams and with Martin McGuinness before that". TD Matt Carthy echoes this viewpoint:

> [W]hen people were turning on their television screens and they were seeing people like Pearse Doherty or Eoin Ó'Broin or Mary Lou McDonald or myself and others, they could clearly see that we were people of a different generation to those that were involved in the conflict.

According to Reidy, as well as this generational shift Sinn Féin "had quite good policies and very good spokespersons on a couple of crucial policy-areas". Eoin Ó'Broin (housing), Louise O'Reilly (health) and Pearse Doherty (finance) are among

those who impressed voters in the run up to the election. Dr Reidy describes Ó'Broin as "excellent in his communications on housing, not just during the campaign but in the years preceding the election". Mullally echoes this and adds that "he has a very forensic and granular understanding not just of Irish housing policy and where it has gone wrong but good ideas elsewhere". In 2019, Ó'Broin released a book called *Home: Why Public Housing is the Answer* which "examines the structural causes of [Ireland's] housing emergency" (Ó'Broin, 2019). This helps to establish him as an expert in the field. Mullally comments on the "juxtaposition of that voice versus Eoghan Murphy who turned out to be the most unpopular and disliked minister for younger people".

Louise O'Reilly was Sinn Féin's Health Spokesperson during the 2020 campaign. Dr Reidy describes her as "very good and very effective at communicating Sinn Féin policy". O'Reilly's counterpart was Fine Gael's Simon Harris, the former Minister for Health. On 20 February 2019, O'Reilly launched the motion of no confidence against Harris. The motion was launched due to the overspend of approximately €450 million in building the National Children's Hospital, the hospital McDonald referred to as "the most expensive hospital in the world" (*RTÉ*, 2020b). On the day the vote of no confidence was carried out, O'Reilly listed other scandals which occurred while Harris was the Minister. Among these she listed the trolley crisis in Ireland's hospitals, the staffing crises in Ireland's health and mental health services, the industrial strike of nurses over wages and the CervicalCheck scandal. She ended her speech by saying "I could go on but I only have five minutes, not five hours" (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019a).

Sinn Féin's Finance Spokesperson, Pearse Doherty, was another popular front bench member of the party. He was elected to the Dáil in 2010 after winning a High Court case "to force the government to hold a by-election in his constituency of Donegal South-West" (Reilly, 2010). The constituency had been without an elected representative in Dáil Éireann for seventeen months by this time. Doherty has been commended for his work regarding the insurance industry in Ireland. On 26 December, the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 was signed into law by the

President of Ireland and would have been fresh in the memory of the public by election day less than two months later. Its purpose is "to reform the law of consumer insurance contracts" (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019b) by legislating for increased transparency and enhanced rights for policy holders.

According to *RTÉ's* 2020 election results page, Doherty received the second highest number of first preference votes in Ireland with 21,044 votes (*RTÉ News*, 2020a). Out of the six most popular posts on Sinn Féin's Facebook account from 14 January 2020 to 8 February 2020, three were videos which solely focused on Doherty speaking on behalf of the party. The most popular video in which he appeared (which ranked second out of the six mentioned) on 22 January received 266,506 views. 99.6% of the reactions to it were positive and the two top comments read: "Fairplay to you pearse , keep up the great work u are doing , vote Sinn Fein people, it's time for change 👍👍" and "Pearse Doherty is in a league of his own!!!" (Sinn Féin Ireland, 2020c).

For previous elections, including the local and European elections 2019, Reidy states that "the party was seen as being opposed to everything, but not having solutions to anything". Reidy believes that Sinn Féin set out to present itself differently to Irish voters which is where "people like Pearse Doherty and Eoin Ó'Broin and Louise O'Reilly and others came into play, in terms of putting forward Sinn Féin as an alternative party and a credible party of government". Reidy discusses Sinn Féin's state-led approach to housing whereas "Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil emphasised more affordable housing and even in relation to social housing, they were very much promoting market-based solutions".

According to the Irish National Election study, Reidy reveals that when voters were asked who they trusted to implement housing policy "the answer was Sinn Féin by a significant margin over all the other political parties". With regard to healthcare, Reidy points out that most parties in the campaign promoted health policies in line with Sláintecare. Despite this, Reidy comments that when voters were asked "who do you trust most on health care, they answered Sinn Fein":

> [I]t seems to be the case that Sinn Fein managed to persuade voters, perhaps that they would be more likely to implement the reforms or that their version of the reforms would be more effective. But certainly voters saw Sinn Fein as being the more credible party on health and housing

Matt Carthy, outlines that issues, "particularly around housing, health [and] public finances", were priorities for the Sinn Féin party between the local and European elections in May 2019 and the general election in February 2020.

1.7 SOCIAL MEDIA TACTICS:

In an interview with Pat Kenny on 25 May 2020, when asked about Sinn Féin's success with the electorate, the party's Spokesperson for Finance and Director of Elections for the 2020 campaign, Pearse Doherty, answered "We use social media… we read the comments and we answer the comments… we engage with them" (*The Pat Kenny Show*, 2020). There were a number of tactics Sinn Féin used on their social media accounts which Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil did not do. As Doherty pointed out to Kenny, the party read through comments on their posts and engaged with them. The Sinn Féin Facebook account regularly replied to comments on their posts, answering questions, correcting what they saw to be misinformation and providing links to various sources when warranted.

The Sinn Féin account also frequently involved the public by posting petitions and asking for their followers' experiences with various issues. It would also frequently post the link to the Sinn Féin website where the public could sign up to become a member of the party. In the six months ahead of the 2020 election, Pearse Doherty personally replied to a number of comments. On 12 January 2020, in the comments section of a Sinn Féin post, a user accused the party of jumping on the bandwagon when committing to policies. Doherty offered his phone number in response by writing "[Facebook user] sorry to hear your view on that June. While I disagree I respect your opinion, I know I have led the campaign against the insurance industry,

Eoin o Broin on a rent rebate and Freeze, John Brady on preventing retirement age increases, I could go on. I'll be in office in the morning if you want to give me a call would like to hear your concerns. [phone number supplied]" (Sinn Féin Ireland, 2020b). Doherty replied to another user on 22 January and McDonald replied to a comment on 11 December 2019.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would often share posts from members of the party. This means that the followers of their respective accounts would be the only Facebook users to see and share these posts directly. Instead of sharing from their party members' profiles, Sinn Féin put up posts and tagged and/ or mentioned the accounts of the politicians involved. McDonald was frequently mentioned or tagged even when not directly involved in said post. As well as the followers of the Sinn Féin party, the friends and followers of each politician tagged or mentioned also see the post appear on their home feeds which broadens the audience. Sinn Féin also checks into locations on its Facebook page. For example, on 20 September 2019, Sinn Féin partook in a climate action strike. McDonald was tagged and the post checked into 'Baile Átha Cliath' which means that McDonald's friends and followers as well as those of Sinn Féin saw this post and it appeared on the pages of both the party and the leader. It also means that any Facebook user who searched for Baile Átha Cliath on Facebook would also see this post.

When mentioned in posts, Mary Lou McDonald and Pearse Doherty garnered a very positive reaction on Sinn Féin's Facebook account. In the lead up to the election, both of these politicians were tagged and posted about increasingly frequently on the Sinn Féin Facebook page. Out of Sinn Féin's most popular posts which were all videos, from 1 January to 8 February 2020, Doherty featured in four and McDonald featured in three. Each of these videos features at least one of these two politicians.

According to Socialbakers, from 1 January to 8 February 2020, the most popular post on Sinn Féin's Facebook account was on 27 January. It was a 1.5 minute-long clip of McDonald at the leaders debate on the Claire Byrne Live Programme on the same night. The caption was "And that's a knockout by Mary Lou 🥊" (Sinn Féin,

2020a). The top comment reads "She was brilliant, definitely time for a change I just hope everyone saying it will actually go out and vote" to which the Sinn Féin account replied: "[User's name] 100%. Remember to keep talking to all the people you know are looking for real change and remind them that the best way of showing this is to vote Sinn Féin on the 8th". The post received 17,629 interactions which included 1,227 comments, 4,935 shares and 11,467 reactions. Of these reactions, 99% (like and love) were positive and 1% (haha, wow, sad) were negative. The video reached 389,639 views.

1.8 TIME FOR CHANGE:

Sinn Féin suffered what Carthy describes as a "bruising day at the polls back in May 2019". He discusses a "framework in terms of messaging and in terms of [Sinn Féin's] organisation" which had been put in place before the local and European elections in May 2019: "Clearly, we hadn't done enough at that stage". Among the lessons Sinn Féin learned after the May 2019 elections Carthy says that "[p]eople agreed with our policies but in many instances, they weren't aware of what our policies were". He states that the party worked to define "the big issues of the day, particularly around housing, health, public finances, in terms of actually supporting workers and families". He states that Sinn Féin was able to "use social media to direct the tenure of the campaign" in a way that they hadn't in previous campaigns: "that was as a result of a number of years of really hard work on building up a social media presence, and using social media in a very clever way". Carthy acknowledges that Sinn Féin was "fortunate in that there was very clearly a public mood for change, coming up to the 2020 election campaign":

   We were in a position because of the work that we had been doing over the
   previous months and years to utilise that and to, I suppose, concentrate the
   'vote for change' around the Sinn Féin policy platform and around the Sinn
   Féin team of spokespersons.

After the economic downturn in 2008, "[h]aving peaked in 2007, the GDP growth rate was negative for the next three years" (Robbins, Lapsley, 2014, p. 5). Robbins and Lapsley (2014) describe the financial agreement reached between the Irish government and Troika as a "financial straightjacket" (p. 3) on the Irish State. Public sector staff were hit with reduced rates of pay and a pension levy which took effect on 1 January 2010. This "resulted in an effective average reduction of 14 per cent in salaries of existing public sector staff as well as a pay freeze until 2014" (Robbins, Lapsley, 2014, p. 8). A National Recovery Plan was later published in November 2010. This plan claimed that adjustments of nearly €15 billion had been implemented in the previous two years and stated that an "additional €15 billion package of measures is required to bring the deficit back to below 3% of GDP by 2014" (Government of Ireland, 2010).

Social welfare expenditure was reformed to yield an intended €2.8 billion. Public service staff numbers were to be reduced with further pay cuts envisaged for those who remained. As well as this, third level education costs were to increase and water charges were due to be introduced in 2014. While maintaining the 12.5% corporation tax (exempting banks), €1.9 billion was to be raised through income tax "changes" (Government of Ireland, 2010). These were among the austerity measures introduced in Ireland from 2010. According to Robbins and Lapsley (2014), "the Government's claim to place the citizen at the centre of public sector reform efforts [was] somewhat disingenuous in view of funding cuts in health, education, social services and policing" (p. 3). Sinn Féin opposed many of the proposed austerity measures at the time including the "introduction of water charges or of property taxes for primary homes" (Sinn Féin, 2011, p. 6). The party attended protest marches in opposition of the proposed water charges. Also contained in the party's 2011 manifesto were proposals to revoke the USC and other mandates enforced under the National Recovery Plan. The manifesto slogan was "There is a better way" (Sinn Féin, 2011, p. 2).

By 2020, remnants of these austerity measures can still be seen. Ireland is currently in a housing crisis. According to Dr Reidy, health and housing were the two most

important issues to Irish voters in the 2020 general election. In 'Housing in Ireland: From crisis to crisis', Kitchin, Hearne and O'Callaghan (2015) write that "[s]helter and a sense of home is essential to our well-being… Housing provides us with sanctuary, a sense of identity and belonging, a firm base from which to venture out into the wider world" (p. 2). Therefore it can be an emotional issue for an electorate. They (2015) posit that the housing crisis in Ireland began during the Celtic Tiger years (1993-2006) and acknowledge that it was deepened by "austerity policies, placing severe stresses on households and the housing sector" (p. 3).

As well as inflated rents and house prices, homelessness has increased exponentially in Ireland in recent years. According to Focus Ireland (2020), the number of people who are homeless (adults and children) and relying on emergency accommodation has increased from 3,845 in January 2015 to 10,271 in January 2020 (Focus Ireland, 2020). The number of homeless children in January 2020 was 3,574. Five years previous in January 2015, that number was 865 (Focus Ireland, 2020).

Public expenditure on health was also reduced during the recovery plan. Ireland is now experiencing a trolley crisis within the health sector. Numerous health scandals have been highlighted which led to a motion of no confidence being raised against the previous Minister for Health, Simon Harris. For those whose financial situation has worsened or stagnated since 2008 and continued to do so, Sinn Féin's slogan of change resonated. Since the 2016 general election, De Bréadún describes the confidence and supply agreement as "a de facto coalition- a coalition without ministerial posts for Fianna Fáil". Therefore it was easy for Sinn Féin to combine both parties in their criticisms of the "[y]ears of neglect and mismanagement by successive Governments" (Sinn Féin 2020, p. 17)

In terms of messaging, De Bréadún comments that "their programme/ manifesto was fairly simple and straightforward". Its slogan was short, concise and easy to understand: "Time for Change, Time for Sinn Féin" (Sinn Féin, 2020). Fine Gael's manifesto slogan was much longer: "A future to Look Forward to, Building the

Republic of Opportunity" (Fine Gael, 2020) and Fianna Fáil's slogan was slightly vague in its intentions: "An Ireland for All" (Fianna Fáil, 2020a). Sinn Féin's manifesto highlighted everyday grievances of the public "speaking the language that other parties didn't manage to connect into". Aiding them, according to De Bréadún, was "the fact that they hadn't been in government in Dublin [which] meant they didn't have to defend their record in that regard".

Discontent with the outcome of the economic crash of 2008 is still fresh in the minds of the public. Carthy details the campaign rhetoric of Fine Gael in 2016 as that "the government were saying 'keep the recovery going' and they [constituencies] were saying 'we haven't felt the recovery yet'". Mullally comments on the fact that this rhetoric was still visible in the 2020 election:

> [T]hey've [Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael] moved on from the crash, they've moved on from austerity. What they can't see is that an awful lot of people haven't because they haven't been able to and Sinn Féin is representing those people.

Mullally remarks on the "brand" that Sinn Féin created which was bolstered by its front bench throughout the campaign. This coincided with an identity crisis on behalf of the public with those in power and "the lack of calibre or engagement that people really have with any Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael politician". Change became the selling point for the Sinn Féin party. The slogan "Time for Change, Time for Sinn Féin" was frequently quoted by the party throughout the campaign. It was also echoed in the comments sections of the Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Facebook pages. Fianna Fáil started to use the idea of change in the final week of the campaign. For example on 3 February 2020, Fianna Fáil posted an amalgamation of its own and Sinn Féin's campaign slogan "It's time for change. Join us in building an Ireland for all" (Fianna Fáil, 2020b). The top comment of this post ends by writing: "call it a day you've passed your sell by date".

CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

A number of factors contributed to Sinn Féin's unexpected rise in first-preference votes in February 2020. As seen in Chapter II, since its inception Sinn Féin had links with the IRA. With ostensible member-crossover happening at leadership level, these links remained inextricable for many voters and politicians in the years following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Despite the party consistently contesting elections since February 1987, it was only in the general election of February 2016 that the party reached double figures with 13.85% of first preference votes. The party's poor performance in the local and European elections of May 2019 seems to have occurred at the beginning of a new campaign strategy which reaped its rewards less than a year later in February 2020.

According to Sinn Féin TD Matt Carthy, the party had implemented a number of frameworks in terms of messaging and organisation prior to the local and European elections in 2019: "Clearly, we hadn't done enough at that stage". After these elections in May, the party sourced feedback on what went wrong. It realised it was perceived as criticising the policies of the incumbent government without offering any solutions to rectify what they saw as issues. In turn the party intensified measures regarding messaging and party-organisation thereafter. One way it did this was through its social media platforms.

In an interview with Pat Kenny in May 2020, TD Pearse Doherty, claimed that the party's use of social media was a large contributing factor in their success with Irish voters. The research for this thesis shows that Sinn Féin's social media campaign was much more successful than that of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The date range was set to the week beginning on 4 August 2019 until election day six months later on 8 February 2020. This time frame was chosen to allow for trends in data and social media tactics to become visible. The platforms examined were Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Most members of the public use Facebook more often than Instagram and Twitter which is reinforced by the higher volume of posts, interactions

and following garnered by the parties' Facebook accounts. As a result, particular emphasis was placed on this platform in the analysis in Chapter IV.

In the six-month time frame, Sinn Féin started out with the highest number of followers. This increased by 17% in these six months. The Sinn Féin account began to consistently reach triple-figure daily follower-increases from the announcement of election day on 14 January throughout the election campaign. Its highest daily increase of page likes during the six month timeline occurred on 22 January when the account received 1,700 page likes. This was also the day that Sinn Féin's Facebook page saw its second highest viewership on one of its videos during the election campaign. The video was 1.45 minutes in length and featured Pearse Doherty on a *Virgin Media News* panel outlining Sinn Féin's proposed tax reforms to combat the health and housing crises with particular emphasis on applying corporation tax to the banking sector. Throughout the six months prior to the general election, Sinn Féin put 415 posts on its Facebook page which is an average of 69 posts per month. Of these 415 post, 97% of the reactions were positive and 3% were negative. 328 of these posts contained videos which received a total of 13,620,905 views.

In comparison, Fine Gael's following of the same six-month time period went from 37,278 page likes to 38,158. This is an increase of just over 2% and 151,547 less page likes than that of Sinn Féin by election day. During these six months Fine Gael posted 84 times which is an average of 14 posts per month. Of these 84 posts, 449 were videos which reached a total of 2,420,572 views which is approximately 18% of Sinn Féin's viewership. 60% of the public reaction to Fine Gael's posts was positive and 40% was negative. Fianna Fáil's following increased in these six months by just under 3%. It posted 175 times which is an average of 29 times per month. 116 of these were video posts and received a total of 3,708,253 views, approximately 73% less than that of Sinn Féin during this time. 68% of the reactions to Fianna Fáil's posts were positive and 32% were negative.

One tactic Sinn Féin used in these six months was frequency. It posted 240 more times than Fianna Fáil in the allotted time-frame and 331 more times than Fine Gael. Fine Gael's total number of interactions was 67,571, Fianna Fáil's was 64,711 whereas Sinn Féin's equivalent in the same time frame was 750,358. On Instagram Leo Varadkar posted over twice as often as McDonald and Martin and had the most popular Instagram account out of the three leaders. Other tactics employed by the Sinn Féin Facebook account were frequently replying to users and posting links to petitions and to the Sinn Féin website where one can sign up to become a member of the party. The account would also ask to hear the experiences of its followers and when hosting a Facebook live video, it would often ask its followers where they were watching from. This promotes a type of inclusion and interactivity which was not visible on the pages of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

Sinn Féin politicians also sometimes replied to comments on the account's posts. One such occurrence led Pearse Doherty to provide his office phone number to a user to talk about her concerns with the party. He also provided her with a day and time that he would be available to talk. In the final weeks of the election campaign, Fianna Fáil did a Facebook live video nearly every day. However, it did not seem to interact directly with its followers. While Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil frequently shared posts from its party members Facebook pages, Sinn Féin would post, tag and/ or mention the politicians involved as well as the location where the event in question was taking place. This broadens its viewership past that of its own followers and places these posts in front of the friends and followers of those tagged and/ or mentioned as well as anyone searching the location which was checked into.

The Instagram and Twitter pages of each of the three parties was also examined during the research phase. On Instagram Sinn Féin performed much stronger than Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. By election day Sinn Féin's Instagram account had 25,356 followers and had seen 88,745 interactions from the week beginning 4 August 2019 and 8 February 2020. Fine Gael had 85 % fewer followers than Sinn Féin by election day and Fianna Fáil had 83% fewer. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's respective Instagram accounts had 93% fewer interactions than that of Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin's Twitter following and interaction-rate was also substantially stronger than those of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

The social media accounts of each of the three leaders were also examined. Mary Lou McDonald's Facebook presence was far superior to that of Micheál Martin and Leo Varadkar. However, Leo Varadkar had the most successful Instagram account. By election day, Varadkar had 24,792 followers on Instagram while McDonald and Micheál Martin had 3,505 and 1,234 respectively. Varadkar's account saw a total of 51,864 interactions in the six months prior to election day. McDonald received 4,429 interactions and Martin received 1,557. Varadkar seems to have posted more habitually. He uploaded 46 posts between August 2019 and election day, McDonald posted 17 times and Martin whose account was only established in January 2020 posted 12 times. As well as posting more frequently, Leo Varadkar has been on Instagram longer than Martin and McDonald have been. His first post is dated 3 April 2017 while McDonald posted for the first time nearly two years later on 8 January 2019 and Martin first posted on 10 January 2020.

Since Varadkar's speech regarding COVID-19 on 12 March, his Instagram following has seen a surge in activity with the former Taoiseach's following going from 26,177 followers on 12 March to 174,137 on 19 July. The largest single increase in following his account saw in this time was on 17 March when it increased by 23.68%. On this day Varadkar appeared in his second National COVID-19 address.

Another area of research examined Sinn Féin's messaging. The research outlines that Sinn Féin's messaging was clear. It also posted its message on its social media channels more frequently. Sinn Féin's campaign slogan which was the title of the foreword of its manifesto was "Time For Change, Time For Sinn Féin" (Sinn Féin, 2020). The layout of the party's manifesto was straight-forward. On the cover it features McDonald, Doherty (both smiling) and Eoin Ó'Broin underneath the caption "Giving workers & families a break, A Manifesto for Change" (Sinn Féin, 2020). The social media analysis discussed in Chapter IV show that McDonald, Doherty and Ó'Broin were selling points for the party. Therefore featuring them on the cover of the

party's manifesto was astute. The physical layout of each page was also the simplest with most sections containing a title, a body of text and bullet points at the end to summarise the section. The party's lexical choices in its manifesto generally reflected every day speech and its rhetoric on social media and in the public eye. This makes it easier for the average person to read and decipher.

As the research outlines, there were a series of events throughout the election campaign which worked in Sinn Féin's favour regarding its approval ratings. One such incident was the near-exclusion of Sinn Féin's leader Mary Lou McDonald from an *RTÉ* leaders debate involving Micheál Martin and Leo Varadkar. This decision was implemented earlier in the campaign by *Virgin Media News* before the second Ipsos MRBI political opinion poll was released. This worked to increase the party's support from the Irish electorate by reinforcing the anti-establishment rhetoric of the party and positioned Sinn Féin as an 'underdog' per se. The research also concludes that the relatively new leader of the party and its spokespersons represent a generational shift and have helped to move the narrative around the party away from its links with the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Without focussing on these elements and with the addition of the expertise of the party's spokespersons, Sinn Féin positioned itself as a genuine contender for government in the Republic of Ireland in 2020.

Past events and perceived inadequacies on behalf of previous governments were one of the largest contributing factors to Sinn Féin's performance in the 2020 election. The aftermath of the economic crash can still be felt by much of the electorate today due mainly to the health and housing crises Ireland has experienced. Sinn Féin's approach to these issues in their manifesto were state-led and the party claims they are attainable through their proposed tax reforms which they briefly outline on pages 109 and 110 of their manifesto . Their opponents contradicted them throughout the campaign. However, the Irish electorate is often confronted by expense-scandals, reports of mismanagement of money and TD salaries which are much higher than their own.

The current administration were also in government when the banks were bailed out after the economic crash of 2008 and as highlighted in Sinn Féin's 2020 manifesto, these banks do not pay corporation tax. From the research conducted through interviews, it seems there is a lack of an ability on behalf of Irish voters to identify with politicians in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. In opposition is the anti-establishment rhetoric of the Sinn Féin party which seems to resonate with the anger of much of the Irish electorate- much the same as how the Podemos party in Spain and the Syriza party in Greece won majorities for the first time.

A recent Ipsos MRBI opinion poll conducted in June 2020 revealed that Fine Gael has risen significantly in its party support since its handling of COVID-19. It now has 37% party support. Sinn Féin maintains its 25% party support while Fianna Fáil's support has decreased by 9 points to 14% (*The Irish Times*/ Ipsos MRBI, 2020). On 27 June, 140 days after the general election in February 2020, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and The Green Party entered into coalition with Micheál Martin serving as the first Taoiseach of this government and Sinn Féin is the largest opposition party.

CHAPTER VI - APPENDICES

Appendix A

Party Facebook data

Sinn Féin

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 1

Month	Reactions	Like	Angry	Love	Sad	Laugh	Shock	Comments	Shares	Owned video posts	Owned video views	Page likes	Post Count
Aug '19	9392	7495	688	514	570	58	67	1631	5110	18	363336	162706	26
Sep '19	26374	23279	431	1737	132	629	166	4159	14471	42	996782	163818	55
Oct '19	52913	45031	1918	4258	975	400	331	9106	34775	51	2551675	166195	64
Nov '19	43607	37958	1006	3798	289	366	190	6150	20385	66	1710123	166836	82
Dec '19	54416	47310	1037	4399	1173	309	188	6712	28887	52	2349743	168698	64
Jan '20	202485	180513	3330	17100	396	781	365	24446	85970	74	4628718	184467	93
Feb '20	87908	77084	101	10314	73	161	175	8959	22502	25	1020528	189705	31
Total	477095	418670	8511	42120	3608	2704	1482	61163	212100	328	13620905	Increase of 26999	415

Table 1.1

	Positive reactions (like, love)	Negative reactions (angry, sad, laugh, shock)
	460790	16305
Percentage	97	3

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Sinn Féin Facebook 2019-2020.

Sinn Féin

Date range: 24/11/18- 24/05/19

Table 1.2

Month	Reactions	Like	Angry	Love	Sad	Laugh	Shock	Comments	Shares	Owned video posts	Owned video views	Page likes	Post count
Nov '18	2863	2599	25	193	2	10	34	706	1358	19	111140	156645	23
Dec '18	18418	16019	298	1395	87	529	90	3441	10640	56	714478	157453	63
Jan '19	23785	20395	280	1984	195	749	182	3805	17103	71	1120561	158345	81
Feb '19	21634	19014	255	1974	115	92	184	3265	15723	79	999703	159295	84
Mar '19	28650	24352	365	2702	756	355	120	3936	14507	81	836398	160437	92
Apr '19	23232	20397	346	2017	280	101	91	3095	11425	86	836099	160943	103
May '19	25723	23000	268	2095	33	267	60	3252	13350	105	914065	161488	119
Total	**144305**	**125776**	**1837**	**12360**	**1468**	**2103**	**761**	**21500**	**84106**	**497**	**5532444**	**Increase of 4843**	**565**

Table 1.3

	Positive reactions (like, love)	Negative reactions (angry, sad, laugh, shock)
	138136	6169
Percentage	96	4

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Sinn Féin Facebook 2018-2019.

Fine Gael

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 1.4

Month	Reactions	Like	Angry	Love	Sad	Laugh	Shock	Comments	Shares	Owned video posts	Owned video views	Page likes	Post Count
Aug '19	1346	1122	19	77	110	16	2	526	268	0	0	37278	4
Sep '19	320	252	23	9	1	34	1	221	78	2	9749	37305	3
Oct '19	661	539	28	34	1	57	2	698	185	3	12801	37304	3
Nov '19	592	445	54	11	1	80	1	614	63	2	4812	37275	11
Dec '19	478	341	67	15	4	51	0	671	52	0	0	37287	4
Jan '20	18427	9151	4084	337	91	4696	68	16499	2618	23	1742574	37814	31
Feb '20	12505	8100	1498	300	41	2530	36	8835	1914	19	650636	38158	28
Total	34329	19950	5773	783	249	7464	110	28064	5178	0	2420572	Increase of 880	84

Table 1.5

	Positive reactions (like, love)	Negative reactions (angry, sad, laugh, shock)
	20733	13596
Percentage	60	40

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Fine Gael Facebook 2019-2020.

Fianna Fáil

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 1.6

Month	Reactions	Like	Angry	Love	Sad	Laugh	Shock	Comments	Shares	Owned video posts	Owned video views	Page likes	Post Count
Aug '19	847	649	42	16	8	131	1	572	201	3	57812	37552	8
Sep '19	1367	1142	94	39	8	75	9	455	228	16	100039	37561	23
Oct '19	1680	1322	150	57	18	131	2	925	338	15	81029	37577	23
Nov '19	2827	2165	173	117	19	340	13	1525	729	15	264167	37607	30
Dec '19	2083	1319	481	47	21	204	11	1841	553	11	350355	37624	15
Jan '20	17720	10351	3234	337	314	3411	73	12580	3821	35	2519442	38230	48
Feb '20	8757	6162	660	243	23	1645	24	4493	1169	21	335409	38564	28
Total	35281	23110	4834	856	411	5937	133	22391	7039	116	3708253	Increase of 1012	175

Table 1.7

	Positive reactions (like, love)	Negative reactions (angry, sad, laugh, shock)
	23966	11315
Percentage	68	32

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Fianna Fáil

Facebook 2019-2020.

Party Leaders' Facebook data

Mary Lou McDonald

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 2

Month	Reactions	Like	Angry	Love	Sad	Laugh	Shock	Comments	Shares	Total interactions	Page likes	Post Count
Aug '19	9154	7650	232	431	720	100	21	1394	1351	11899	99932	28
Sep '19	6748	5719	291	371	89	239	39	1303	1076	9127	99826	28
Oct '19	15077	13051	668	862	115	243	138	2641	1914	19632	99875	37
Nov '19	8473	7443	182	632	157	27	32	712	768	9953	99953	39
Dec '19	23006	19808	54	2443	250	338	113	3167	9736	35909	102137	27
Jan '20	71435	63225	1135	6796	96	129	54	10438	16156	98029	110999	36
Feb '20	70536	60511	20	9856	4	113	32	8744	10381	89661	116660	18
Total	**204429**	**177407**	**2582**	**21391**	**1431**	**1189**	**429**	**28399**	**41382**	**274210**	**16728**	**213**

Table 2.1

	Positive reactions (like, love)	Negative reactions (angry, sad, laugh, shock)
	198798	5631
Percentage	98	2

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Mary Lou McDonald Facebook 2019-2020.

Leo Varadkar

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 2.2

Month	Reactions	Like	Angry	Love	Sad	Laugh	Shock	Comments	Shares	Total interactions	Page likes	Post Count
Aug '19	1151	784	1	79	286	1	0	117	41	1309	39394	1
Sep '19	5090	4517	109	328	5	111	20	1572	417	7079	39891	14
Oct '19	3357	2851	196	207	7	89	7	1793	428	5578	40228	10
Nov '19	3282	2403	520	140	37	172	10	2641	629	6552	40426	15
Dec '19	2780	1712	666	166	15	209	12	2662	655	6097	41129	6
Jan '20	10907	7109	1879	515	28	1352	24	8888	1408	21203	42236	20
Feb '20	9110	5455	1260	398	19	1959	19	6484	761	16355	42580	11
Total	35677	24831	4631	1833	397	3893	92	24157	4339	64173	Increase of 3186	77

Table 2.3

	Positive reactions (like, love)	Negative reactions (angry, sad, laugh, shock)
	26664	9013
Percentage	75	25

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Leo Varadkar Facebook profile 2019-2020.

Micheál Martin

Date range: 04/08/20- 08/02/20

Table 2.4

Month	Reactions	Like	Angry	Love	Sad	Laugh	Shock	Comments	Shares	Total interactions	Page likes	Post Count
Aug '19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18825	0
Sep '19	487	452	11	7	2	14	1	120	65	672	18823	11
Oct '19	668	547	50	14	11	45	1	510	142	1320	18850	7
Nov '19	555	451	58	10	6	29	1	409	101	1065	18841	8
Dec '19	594	531	15	25	3	18	2	179	84	857	18869	6
Jan '20	3422	2958	185	80	10	179	10	1548	320	5290	19139	12
Feb '20	788	714	20	18	0	35	1	356	97	1241	19295	2
Total	6514	5653	339	154	32	320	16	3122	809	10445	Increase of 470	46

Table 2.5

	Positive reactions (like, love)	Negative reactions (angry, sad, laugh, shock)
	5807	707
Percentage	89	11

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Micheál Martin Facebook profile 2019-2020.

Appendix C

Party Instagram data

Sinn Féin

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 3

Month	Like	Comments	Total interactions	Video posts	Video views	Followers gained	Followers lost	Post Count
Aug '19	5223	145	5368	1	2390	385	0	10
Sep '19	10227	205	10432	5	10865	581	0	21
Oct '19	6146	147	6293	2	3897	716	1	13
Nov '19	14582	263	14845	7	15644	868	0	22
Dec '19	18818	391	19209	7	28849	1208	5	22
Jan '20	24668	441	25109	9	53266	3687	0	25
Feb '20	7320	169	7489	1	7678	2355	0	4
Total	**86984**	**1761**	**88745**	**32**	**122589**	**9800**	**6**	**117**

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Sinn Féin Instagram profile 2019-2020.

Fine Gael

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 3.1

Month	Like	Comments	Total interactions	Video posts	Video views	Followers gained	Followers lost	Post Count
Aug '19	522	15	537	1	371	70	7	3
Sep '19	257	11	268	3	2022	70	1	3
Oct '19	265	26	291	2	1530	73	5	3
Nov '19	88	5	93	1	399	70	7	2
Dec '19	41	13	54	0	0	51	13	1
Jan '20	2488	206	2694	12	19552	496	1	20
Feb '20	1912	119	2031	12	9340	255	0	17
Total	**5573**	**395**	**5968**	**31**	**33214**	**1085**	**34**	**49**

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Fine Gael

Instagram profile 2019-2020.

Fianna Fáil

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 3.2

Month	Like	Comments	Total interactions	Video posts	Video views	Followers gained	Followers lost	Post Count
Aug '19	178	4	182	2	846	41	9	4
Sep '19	807	10	817	5	1532	80	3	12
Oct '19	501	21	522	4	1731	226	0	9
Nov '19	972	37	1009	10	4263	85	9	23
Dec '19	363	19	382	6	3140	74	6	9
Jan '20	1891	81	1972	14	8182	565	2	25
Feb '20	1233	103	1336	8	4111	252	0	16
Total	**5945**	**275**	**6220**	**49**	**23805**	**1323**	**29**	**98**

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Fianna Fáil

Instagram profile 2019-2020.

Appendix D

Party Leaders' Instagram data

Mary Lou McDonald

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 4

Month	Like	Comments	Total interactions	Video posts	Video views	Post Count
Aug '19	962	23	985	0	0	7
Sep '19	1391	44	1435	0	0	6
Oct '19	1307	40	1347	0	0	3
Nov '19	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dec '19	643	19	662	0	0	1
Jan '20	0	0	0	0	0	0
Feb '20	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**4303**	**126**	**4429**	**0**	**0**	17

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Mary Lou McDonald Instagram profile 2019-2020.

Leo Varadkar

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 4.1

Month	Like	Comments	Total interactions	Video posts	Video views	Post Count
Aug '19	3644	185	3829	0	0	3
Sep '19	14515	571	15086	1	7806	11
Oct '19	9162	489	9651	5	42886	9
Nov '19	10012	359	10371	0	0	10
Dec '19	775	86	861	1	9402	2
Jan '20	7116	810	7926	5	60623	7
Feb '20	3869	271	4140	3	30434	4
Total	**49093**	**2771**	**51864**	**15**	**151151**	**46**

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Leo Varadkar

Instagram profile 2019-2020.

Micheál Martin

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 4.2

Month	Like	Comments	Total interactions	Video posts	Video views	Post Count
Aug '19	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sep '19	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oct '19	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nov '19	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dec '19	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jan '20	874	37	911	4	3798	10
Feb '20	614	32	646	1	1534	2
Total	**1488**	**69**	**1557**	**5**	**5332**	**12**

Data sourced from CrowdTangle and Socialbakers databases. (2020) Micheál Martin

Instagram profile 2019-2020.

Appendix E

Party Twitter Accounts

Sinn Féin

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 5

Month	Followers gained	Followers lost	Mentions	Tweets	Total interactions	Like	Replies	Retweets
Aug '19	651	2	728	276	20724	14703	17	6004
Sep '19	971	0	3223	314	28506	19414	408	8684
Oct '19	1918	0	16206	317	44335	28900	2262	13173
Nov '19	1232	0	15425	293	38594	26576	1600	10418
Dec '19	1866	0	14491	208	33578	24689	1264	7625
Jan '20	6465	5	862	315	108999	85132	27	23840
Feb '20	4423	0	1099	87	51156	40746	13	10397
Total	**17526**	**7**	**52034**	**1810**	**325892**	**240160**	**5591**	**80141**

Data sourced from Socialbakers database. (2020) Sinn Féin Twitter profile 2019-2020.

Fine Gael

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 5.1

Month	Followers gained	Followers lost	Mentions	Tweets	Total interactions	Like	Replies	Retweets
Aug '19	198	8	451	6	404	315	0	89
Sep '19	357	0	2445	24	878	665	7	206
Oct '19	550	0	12246	32	1534	930	293	311
Nov '19	315	0	14364	8	1034	646	196	192
Dec '19	271	7	10588	27	988	558	269	161
Jan '20	1880	0	2733	287	12878	9569	24	3285
Feb '20	670	0	1007	156	10642	8048	16	2578
Total	4241	15	43834	540	28358	20731	805	6822

Data sourced from Socialbakers database. (2020) Fine Gael Twitter profile 2019-2020.

Fianna Fáil

Date range: 04/08/19- 08/02/20

Table 5.2

Month	Followers gained	Followers lost	Mentions	Tweets	Total interactions	Like	Replies	Retweets
Aug '19	224	7	212	63	1213	829	26	358
Sep '19	269	1	1541	128	2064	1352	150	562
Oct '19	398	0	6299	124	1937	1176	245	516
Nov '19	889	0	7329	152	2772	1742	377	653
Dec '19	225	12	6952	91	1968	1141	404	423
Jan '20	1694	0	545	267	7533	5195	42	2296
Feb '20	598	0	451	61	2459	1818	6	635
Total	**4297**	**20**	**23329**	886	**19946**	**13253**	**1250**	**5443**

Data sourced from Socialbakers database. (2020) Fianna Fáil Twitter profile 2019-2020.

Appendix F

Party Manifesto Content Analysis

Table 6

Party	Word Count	% Criticisms	% Self-endorsements	% Priorities/ government agenda
Sinn Féin	47084	19.77	2.6	77.54
Fine Gael	49507	1.81	21.02	77.1
Fianna Fáil	39492	12.5	2.3	85.16

Data obtained through content analysis by the author (2020).

Lexical content analysis of manifestos

Table 6.1

Word/ phrase	Sinn Féin	Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil
Sinn Féin	451	0	0
Fine Gael	49	210	41
Fianna Fáil	42	8	129
Successive (Irish) governments/ administrations	7	0	0
Fine Gael supported by Fianna Fáil/ Fianna Fáil supported by Fine Gael	5	0	0
Change	24	28	36
All	166	102	101
Future	32	75	63
Opportunity	13	102	101
Workers	103	39	25
Fail/ failed/ failing/ failure	35	2	9
Equal/ equality	41	15	23
Inequal/ inequality	24	4	7
Power	23	10	6
Insurance	45	12	15
Free	49	29	26
Privatisation	12	0	1
Investment	86	65	62
Underfunded/ underfunding	12	0	0
Bank(s)/ banker(s) / banking	53	20	14
Immediate/ immediately/ urgently/ urgent/ now	34	39	20
People	200	188	125
Citizen	26	26	40
Child/ children	170	110	129
Disability/ disabilities	84	33	57
Brexit	24	39	39
European Union/ EU	56	38	104

Community/ communities	122	144	155
Rural	32	39	62
Business/ businesses	52	40	36
Landlord(s)	2	7	5
Welfare	14	28	14
Travellers	27	11	13
Crisis	28	8	27

Data obtained through content analysis by author (2020).

Appendix G

Interview participants

Deaglán De Bréadún

Interviewed by Bethany Langham on 17 June, 2020

Deaglán De Bréadún is an Irish journalist and author. De Bréadún spent much of his journalistic career working with *The Irish Times* where he held a number of positions including Northern Editor, Foreign Affairs Correspondent, Political Correspondent and Irish Language Editor. He also held the position of Political Editor of *The Irish Sun* from 2014-2015. De Bréadún has written two books in English (*The Far Side of Revenge: Making Peace in Northern Ireland*, 2001; *Power Play: The Rise of Modern Sinn Féin*, 2015) and three books in Irish (*Sceallóga*, 1990; *Cinnlínte: Saol an Iriseora*, 2016; *Scéalta Nuachta*, 2016). De Bréadún now writes an Irish political column for the Belfast-based newspaper *The Irish News*.

Dr Theresa Reidy

Interviewed by Bethany Langham on 1 July, 2020

Dr Theresa Reidy is a political scientist in the Department of Government at University College Cork (UCC). Dr Reidy specialises in electoral behaviour and political institutions. She has been funded to carry out political research by bodies such as the European Commission, the Irish Research Council, the Department of an Taoiseach and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Dr Reidy has co-edited two books (*The post-crisis Irish voter*, 2018; *Electoral Management; Institutions and Practices in an Established Democracy*, 2016). She has authored and co-authored many peer reviewed journals, book chapters, published reports, conference publications and newspaper and magazine articles. Dr Reidy has also contributed to a number of government policies including policies around emigrant voting and a Joint Houses of the Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution. Among other accolades, Dr Reidy won Research Communicator of the Year from UCC in 2018.

Matt Carthy

Interviewed by Bethany Langham on 22 June, 2020

Matt Carthy is a Sinn Féin Teachta Dála (TD) for the Cavan-Monaghan constituency. He was elected to the Dáil in the February 2020 general election. Prior to this, Carthy served as a Sinn Féin Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the Midwest-Northern constituency from 2014 to 2020. While a Monaghan County Counsellor he served on Carrickmacross Town Council and Monaghan County Council. Carthy was Sinn Féin's Director of Elections for the 2016 general election and is the party's current Spokesperson for Agriculture

Rachael English

Interviewed by Bethany Langham on 2 July, 2020

Rachael English is an Irish radio presenter, journalist and author. She has presented on a number of radio programmes including *Five Seven Live* (now *Drivetime*), and currently presents *Morning Ireland* on *RTÉ* Radio One. English began her radio career at Clare FM in Ennis. Since joining *RTÉ* she has also worked on *RTÉ* 2FM, the *News at One* and *Today with Pat Kenny*. English has co-hosted *RTÉ's* election coverage since 2002. She has also authored five novels (*Going Back*, 2013; *Each and Every One*, 2015; *The American Girl*, 2017; *The Night of the Party*, 2019; *The Paper Bracelet*, 2020).

Una Mullally

Interviewed by Bethany Langham on 1 July, 2020

Una Mullully is an Irish journalist and author. She began writing for *The Irish Times* in 2011 and now writes a weekly column for the newspaper. Mullally also writes opinion pieces for *The Guardian*. She is a regular contributor to current affairs programmes and documentaries for news organisations such as *RTÉ* and the *BBC*. Mullally has also presented programmes for TG4. In 2014, Mullally's book *In The Name Of Love* was published. It is an oral history of the movement campaigning for marriage equality in Ireland. Mullally has received many awards for her writing and activism including Online News Association Women's Leadership Accelerator (2019) and one of IMAGE's Women of the Year (2018).

Appendix

Sample questions from interviews:

Deaglán De Bréadún

- What do you think were the turning points for Sinn Féin during the 2020 election campaign?
- Do you think there were any events in the last 5 years which may have influenced Sinn Féin's success in the 2020 election? If so, what were they?
- In your book *Power Play*, you mentioned that if Mary Lou McDonald was the leader of Sinn Féin, the party would potentially appeal to more voters. She had been leader for over a year before the May 2019 elections, yet the party performed very poorly. How do you think she achieved this turn-around ahead of the 2020 election? Or do you think she had anything to do with it at all?
- What was Sinn Féin's biggest obstacle coming into the 2020 election?

Dr Theresa Reidy:

- What do you think was the most attractive element of Sinn Féin's 2020 campaign to voters? Could you see a difference strategy-wise between their campaign in 2020 and that of 2016?
- What do you think Sinn Féin's strongest policy-proposals were going into the election?
- Do you think there was anything that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did or didn't do to influence the popularity of Sinn Féin with voters/ influence their own popularity with the Irish public?
- Do you think Sinn Féin have entrenched themselves firmly in the public eye as one of 'the big three' in Irish politics or can you see them fading away after the excitement of the last few months now that they are in opposition?

Matt Carthy

- Can you tell me the main duties of the Director of Elections within Sinn Féin (assuming they differ from party to party)?

- What was your primary focus in this role for the 2016 general election?

- Could you see a difference between the campaign strategy in 2016 and that of 2020?

- How do you think Sinn Féin managed to perform so well in the 2020 election given the party's performance in the local elections less than a year previous in May 2019?

Rachael English

- What do you think was the most attractive element of Sinn Féin's 2020 campaign to voters?

- Were there any events during the campaign you think may have influenced their appeal to the public?

- Do you think there was anything that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did or didn't do to influence the popularity of Sinn Féin with voters?

- Sinn Féin performed poorly in the 2019 local and European elections. Many say they learned their lessons from this experience. Could you see a change in Sinn Féin's strategy between this time and the February 2020 general election?

Una Mullally

- What do you think was the most astute aspect of Sinn Féin's campaign strategy in 2020?

- Are there any members of the party who you think may have particularly enticed voters?

- Were there any events during the campaign you think may have influenced Sinn Féin's appeal to the public?

- Do you think the exclusion of Sinn Féin by some media outlets and other political parties potentially had an impact on some undecided voters?

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