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The “crisis of political parties” in the British & Irish Isles

# The discursive construction of a people: A new approach to understanding the strategies of the Scottish National Party and Sinn Féin

*Comprendre le nationalisme par le populisme inclusif : une analyse comparative du SNP et du Sinn Féin*

Article publié le 15 décembre 2023.

**Michael Scanlan**

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# The discursive construction of a people: A new approach to understanding the strategies of the Scottish National Party and Sinn Féin

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## **1. Introduction**

- 1 There is a growing body of literature which seeks to explain the electoral successes of the SNP and Sinn Féin. With regards to the SNP, much of this work has been carried out by the Scottish Election Study (SES). In particular, the SES has focussed on issue cleavage and salience among Scottish voters, identifying four distinct tribes with membership dependent on how they voted in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum and the 2016 EU Referendum. Out of these

four tribes, the Yes/Remain group is the largest and this is where the SNP draws its support from (McMillan & Henderson 2021). This research has done much to explain and analyse who votes for the SNP confirming earlier research that argues the SNP drew new support from those who favoured Scottish independence (Fieldhouse and Prosser 2018). Equally, it is well established that the SNP draws its support primarily from those who feel either Scottish and not British, or more Scottish than British (Carman *et al.* 2014). In terms of Sinn Féin, Brexit is also pointed to as a driver for their support and, indeed, Irish reunification, both north and south of the Border (Evershed and Murphy 2021), as is the impact of economic downturn and austerity (Lewis-Beck and Quinlan 2021).

- 2 We therefore have some understanding of the issues that are leading people to support both the SNP and Sinn Féin and the constitutional and territorial issues. However, given the centrality of values to nationalist parties (Mouritsen *et al.* 2019), there is still a significant gap in exploring how the SNP and Sinn Féin articulate and leverage values to create a unified support.
- 3 Initial work has been carried out to identify the SNP and Sinn Féin as populist parties (Massetti 2020; Scanlan 2022). There has also been recent work exploring how Sinn Féin and the DUP use a populist communication style to express, among other things, the inherent “decency” of their supporters (Swanson and Gherghina 2023). Equally, there is a developing trend in literature arguing that the theoretical approach of Laclau has considerable efficacy in understanding how populist parties create and unite a heterogeneous people (Katsambekis 2020), representing a move from the dominant ideational approach to populism of Mudde and other writers who emphasise the people as being homogenous (Mudde 2004).
- 4 This paper therefore attempts to build upon this by focussing upon how the SNP and Sinn Féin use what they perceive as common values to generate popular demands and thus advance their aims. In doing so, this paper will put forward two arguments: first, that examining the centrality of values to nationalist parties helps us to understand how these parties gain and maintain support and, second, that Laclau’s theories of populism, hitherto limited mainly to studies of left populism (Mouffe 2018; Acha 2019) can also be applied to certain

forms of nationalist movements to reveal new insights in terms of who the people in these movements are and what unites them as a coherent and heterogenous people.

- 5 The qualitative analysis focusses on two case studies, the SNP and Sinn Féin. The empirical evidence comes from 15 elite interviews carried out with members of both parties who currently hold or have held in the past positions of influence in policy, communication, and party organisation. This is accompanied by analysis of SNP and Sinn Féin manifestos for elections to the Scottish Parliament, Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Dáil Éireann from the period 2007-2023. This time frame has been chosen due to the impact of the Global Financial Crisis and subsequent austerity programmes on the electoral fortunes of both parties.
- 6 The format of the paper is as follows: it begins with a discussion of Laclau's theories of how a populist people arises and is unified and a brief examination of the nationalism of both the SNP and Sinn Féin. This is followed by a short methodology section before the empirical evidence is introduced and analysed. The paper then concludes with considerations of the results and potential areas for further research.

## **2. A populist people and elite and the nationalism of the SNP and Sinn Féin**

- 7 There is no one single approach to populism (Heinisch *et al.* 2017) but the dominant approach in the field of populism studies is that of Mudde. His approach has considerable strengths, yet it can be criticised for its emphasis on the morality of the people (Mudde 2004) and on their homogeneity (Taggart 2000). However, the data obtained for this research demonstrated neither an intrinsic morality to the people nor a homogeneity. Indeed, both the SNP and Sinn Féin stressed the heterogeneity of their people, as this paper shall explore.
- 8 To understand the SNP and Sinn Féin, what is required is an approach which emphasises the heterogeneity of the inclusionary populist people and this is drawn from the theories of Laclau. The people, argue Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 197), exist as a "polyphony of voices"

and it is through populism that they are united as a unified whole. This construction of a people is central not only to populism but politics in general (Laclau 2007b). Laclau argues that “[a]n ensemble of equivalential demands articulated by an empty signifier is what constitutes a ‘people’” (Laclau 2007: 171). Equivalential demands do not mean that the people all want the same thing, but rather that their diverse demands are united by them being unfulfilled by the elite, that is, the dominant force in any polity. Laclau explains equivalential relations by describing a hypothetical shantytown outside a developing industrial city. As problems of housing arise, such as better sanitation and access to utilities, residents begin to make demands that these problems are solved. With an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an institutional inability to absorb them in isolation from the others (i.e., in a differential way), an equivalential relation is formed between them. These equivalential relations serve to widen the gap between the institutions and the people (Laclau 2007b: 73-74).

- 9 What unites the people is not that they all wish the same thing, as they have a multitude of demands. What begins to unite them is that these demands are unfulfilled and there is a gap between the people and power, i.e., an inability to have their demands fulfilled. This unity is completed using an empty signifier (Laclau 2007a), i.e. a word or term which lacks meaning, but fixes meaning to other words or concepts – in other words, one which gives contextual meaning to unfulfilled demands. This could be seen, for example, in the 2008 Obama campaign’s use of “Hope” as an empty signifier to unite supporters (Kumar 2014).
- 10 Finally, there is the identity of the elite to be considered. Whilst a common term in populism studies, the “elite” is not a term used by Laclau and Mouffe. Rather, they use the term “hegemony” and whilst this is a more complex term than “elite”, the hegemony act in the same way as the elite in that they prevent the people from fulfilling their demands (Scanlan 2022).
- 11 Through these dimensions, an excluded people and their values, an excluding elite and their values and an empty signifier that unites, we can gain an understanding of how the SNP and Sinn Féin conceptualise and mobilise their support.

### 3. Nationalist inclusionary populism

- 12 Inclusionary populism is a subtype of populism which seeks to expand rather than limit membership of the people, often reaching out to marginalised or discriminated groups to do so (Scanlan 2022). As both the SNP and Sinn Féin advance territorial claims, Scottish independence and Irish reunification respectively, we can consider them both nationalist parties. The values of civic nationalism give rise to the demands of populism, and the values-based differences between people and elite give rise to a populist antagonism (Scanlan 2022).
- 13 The inclusionary component of their populism is, again, linked to their nationalism. The SNP's core ideology is civic nationalism (Duclos 2016) and it claims to emphasise tolerance and equality through an active citizenry, regardless of ancestry or culture (McAnulla and Crines 2017).
- 14 The nationalism of Sinn Féin comes from its central ideology of Irish republicanism. As with the civic nationalism of the SNP, Sinn Féin's republicanism emphasises both core values and a diverse citizenry (Scanlan 2022). There are, however, two distinct forms of republicanism: the ethno-nationalism of Pádraig Pearse and the internationalist socialism of James Connolly (Hoey 2019). Both Pearse and Connolly were leading figures in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century republicanism and their influence continues in Irish politics, with the ethno-nationalism of Pearse influencing the more mainstream republicanism of Fianna Fáil and the internationalist socialism of Connolly influencing the more radical republicanism of Sinn Féin as they are today (Scanlan 2022). While the historic roots of republicanism come from both Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, in Northern Ireland it has only been found within Catholic communities.
- 15 Modern republicanism broadly begins with the 1916 Proclamation of the Republic (Hearty 2018) and it remains central to the ideology of Sinn Féin. The Proclamation can be seen as the founding document of the Irish state and although it has not been respected to the letter by the governments of Ireland (Frost 2017), it still has significant implica-

tions regarding the national values it expresses and how these are interpreted.

- 16 The analysis of the empirical evidence will focus on this diverse people, their values and their demands along with the elite who exclude them from fulfilling their demands and consider what the Laclauan approach can reveal.

## 4. Methodology

- 17 The data comes from two sources: interviews with 15 SNP and Sinn Féin activists, politicians and party staff undertaken from 2019 to 2021 and from manifestos from 2007 to 2022. The timeframe has been selected as both the SNP and Sinn Féin, although predominantly Sinn Féin, used anti-austerity messages following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis to broaden their electoral appeal.
- 18 Participants were recruited through direct requests via email, appeals on social media and through personal contacts. In selecting the participants there was an attempt to have a wide range of demographics in terms of age, gender and party role. Although there is a skew in favour of male participants, there was no noticeable difference in data from male and female participants. The selection of participants was informed by Katz and Mair's "three faces of the party model" (Katz and Mair 1993) where the party in office (elected politicians), party on the ground (activists) and party bureaucracy (party officials) were all approached. Speculative emails were issued, and a balance was kept between gender, age and party role as much as possible.
- 19 Finally, given that Sinn Féin operates in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, participants were selected from both territories. A complete list of participants and manifestos is available in Appendix 1.
- 20 In the interests of transparency, which interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic have been identified. However, there was no noticeable difference in data collected pre-crisis and during the crisis. The data from interviews and manifestos were deductively analysed, in that there were clear dimensions that could be identified

and analysed, using the Laclau conception of the people as previously discussed.

## 5. Who are the people and who are the elite?

21 *The SNP*

22 The SNP present their people as the entire population of Scotland. There is no division by class, ethnicity, nationality, or any other identity. All that matters is residency. The people share core values, and, from these values, the unfulfilled demands arise, with the primary demand being independence for Scotland and with secondary demands for a fairer and more egalitarian society being associated with the fulfilment of the primary demand.

23 This claim to represent the entirety of Scotland was made by all participants, with P1 arguing:

I'd like to think, actually, we are a very broad church. I think we represent those from the very poorest in society through to some wealthy individuals... So actually, I think it's an incredibly broad and diverse representation. And I don't think we're as focused as, for instance, the Conservatives or Labour. I think we represent a much wider group of our population.

24 This claim was further supported by other interviewees:

The SNP has, throughout its history, had a very broad base of support. It's drawn support from all walks of life, all kinds of traditions, all parts of the country. It's not got the same-- its historic roots are different from the Labour Party, which has its roots in the trade union movement and the working-- the broad working classes, if you like and organized Labour. And then the Conservatives basically at the other end of the spectrum. The SNP has always drawn on that kind of cross-section of society. (P4)

25 The goal of independence for Scotland was cited as a key reason for this universalist appeal: "If your ultimate goal is independence for



Scotland, you want to take everybody with you, as high a number as you can possibly get.” (P6).

- 26 SNP support is reflective of the wider Scotland. The SNP as a party is heterogenous, their supporters are heterogenous, Scotland is heterogenous, and so the SNP represents the people of Scotland in a way that none of the other parties active in Scotland can.
- 27 This heterogeneity is further strengthened by the SNP’s belief that Scottish citizenship and thus membership of the people, is based not upon birth or ethnicity but on residency (P4). There are two reasons why the SNP might adopt this rhetoric; firstly, through the lens of nationalism, the SNP are attempting to demonstrate that their nationalism is inclusive, that the SNP is the sole defender of an inclusive Scotland, and to offer the implicit argument that a residence-based citizenship is not what is now as part of the UK but what could be as an independent nation (Duclos, 2016). The second reason is that of the people as being heterogenous, thus giving a larger constituency and pool of potential support for the SNP.
- 28 There is a significant body of research that points to nationalists creating or appealing to shared culture and values to build a cohesive national community (Kongshøj 2019), including within civic nationalism (Larin 2020). Analysis of SNP manifestos reveals evidence to suggest that the SNP have done similar:

Scotland is a diverse, welcoming and outward-looking nation, with compassion and a drive for fairness sitting at the very heart of our values. The SNP has demonstrated a strong and enduring commitment to international engagement. Our relationships and engagement with the international community are important – they benefit trade, investment, travel, education and knowledge exchange, and help to promote our values, including human rights (SNP 2016: 41).

- 29 Participants were asked what they believed were the values of SNP supporters and similar themes emerged indicating the unfulfilled demands of the people: “Equality, inclusion, tackling racism, tackling deprivation” (P6), “open-minded...supportive of an inclusive society” (P7), “They want to see a healthier, more prosperous, more egalitarian society” (P3). In this respect, the SNP are not much different from the other Scottish parties. The Scottish Labour Party claims to value

“equality and social justice” (Scottish Labour Party 2019), the Scottish Liberal Democrats stand for a “fair, free and open society” (Scottish Liberal Democrats 2016), the Scottish Conservatives defend “equality of opportunity” (Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party 2019), and the Scottish Greens want Scotland to be “fairer” (Scottish Greens 2016). However, none of these parties make the claim that their values are intrinsically “Scottish”. As per the arguments of Duclos (2016), the SNP make a claim for inherently egalitarian Scottish values and a further implication that only the SNP can represent and articulate these values on behalf of Scotland. By doing so, the SNP have attempted to create a Scottish people bound not by ethnicity but by values.

- 30 However important values may be, though, what matters in the Laclau derived conception of the people used in this paper are the unfulfilled demands of the people. These demands, however, come from the values of the people of Scotland and we can see the link between values and the unfulfilled demands which emerge from them. P3 spoke of how the values of their supporters gave rise to demands:

They're more often to be social-democratic. They have a social-democratic outlook, and they want to see a fairer distribution of wealth within society. They want to see a healthier, more prosperous, more egalitarian society.

- 31 Within this we can see clear evidence of the demands of the people of Scotland coming from these values and this was echoed by P4 pointing to policy successes of the SNP: “Scrapping tuition fees, free prescriptions, more police on the streets.” Policies for more police are not, necessarily, an egalitarian value, but it is in keeping with the SNP’s catch-all stance.
- 32 We can also see evidence of similar demands for policies based on the Scottish values identified by the SNP within their manifestos. Their 2019 Westminster manifesto, for example, includes demands to protect the NHS from being included in post-Brexit trade deals, an expansion of free childcare, a promise to maintain free higher education tuition and demands to end austerity through an increase in social security funding (SNP 2019). Indeed, these are common policy demands from the SNP and are reflected in all of their manifestos.

33 This, however, poses the question that if the SNP are able to have policy successes based on the value-led demands of the people of Scotland, can they be considered to be unfulfilled? This was a paradox resolved by P2 when he gave his rationale for independence for Scotland:

I think it's quite vividly demonstrated, right now, that there are huge hindrances in our ability to do so because a lot of macroeconomic policy is still determined by UK parliament, UK government...The significant power to provide economic stimulus still resides within the hands of the UK government. The fact that our overall budget in Scotland, obviously for the Scottish government, is determined by expenditure decisions for England through the UK government kind of limit of our ability to go as far we would like. But yes, that's a fundamental driver for me and, I believe, for most of us in the SNP.

34 For the SNP, no matter how far they can go in fulfilling demands through policies, these demands will never be entirely fulfilled due to the limitations of the Scottish Parliament in its current form as a regional assembly. Only through independence, with full powers for the Scottish Parliament, can the SNP fulfil the demands of the people.

35 The SNP express several demands around a central theme of having a better society which are rooted in what the SNP claim are the values of Scotland. The people in Scotland demand the policies that will lead to an egalitarian society because of their core values.

36 In terms of identifying an empty signifier, this cannot be done with complete confidence. However, given that we know that the empty signifier is what gives meaning and unity to the demands and, in this instance, values of the people, we can make an argument that, for the SNP, the empty signifier is "independence". This is the core goal of the SNP, and it is through this goal that the SNP argue that the demands of the people for economic inclusion and justice and the egalitarian values can be fulfilled. It is Scottish independence which gives meaning to the demands of the Scottish people.

37 Concluding with the elite, participants rejected the idea that there was an elite in Scotland. P2, an MSP, said:

I would recognise that it's a term (the elite) that can be utilized by different people to mean different groups. I mean, looking at it objectively I can see how people would perceive me to be part of an elite group, and sometimes you are. There's only 129 people in Scotland who have been elected to the Scottish Parliament, so in some ways that does make you part of an elite group, but I don't particularly perceive myself as being part of the elite.

- 38 This argument that elites are somehow un-Scottish is deeply rooted within Scottish cultural values. This was made explicit by P3 and talking about the appeal of the SNP: “I think that the egalitarian view that it has, we’re all Jock Tamson’s Bairns, the way in that people work together are inclusionary in that regard”. “We’re a’ Jock Tamson’s Bairns” is a common saying in Scotland, expressing that people in Scotland are not only all part of the same family but that there is an inherent equality and egalitarianism (Hayward and MacBride 2010). The ideas expressed by participants are linked to the idea that there cannot be a Scottish elite and we cannot be part of an elite because elites are not Scottish.
- 39 Every participant identified Westminster, and the parties of Westminster, as the elite. P3, who sits in Westminster as an MP, made this clear: “You can't do the job I do working with the UK government and not see the elite in action. There is an elite and you see it in the UK government.”
- 40 Participants made clear what they saw as the difference in values between the people in Scotland and the elite. In discussing the Conservative Party at Westminster, P3 argued: “I dislike their political philosophy because I think it's about greed and not about generosity and I think it's patronising too.” This difference in values was made explicit by P7:

I think there's definitely clear evidence that would suggest that Scotland is going in a very different direction to the rest of the UK. So obviously, the rest of the UK in terms of what the voters think is very much this idea of being Eurosceptic, of centre-right and even far-right politics. And I think the UK and British elite, if you like, and the British government are really only dancing to that tune.

41 The perceived difference, even incompatibility, of values between the people and elite is clear.

42 *Sinn Féin*

43 In terms of who they identified as the people, Sinn Féin did not display the same universalist consensus as the SNP, although they did display a desire to move beyond their traditional working-class support. Values, especially the core value of how Sinn Féin conceptualise republicanism, are equally important to Sinn Féin and their supporters. However, economic demands have a greater salience for their support, and we see significant attempts to build alliances over economic and social issues.

44 For Sinn Féin participants, there was a lack of consensus about who they represented with some, such as P8, taking the view that Sinn Féin had a universalist appeal: “I feel we represent everybody in the country”, while P12 and P13 emphasised a class-based support: “Overwhelmingly I think we represent working class people, both North and South.” (P13).

45 It is in the values of these supporters, though, that there appears to be more agreement among participants, with P8 making the argument clearly (“The bulk [of our support] are united Irishers”), a belief shared by all participants. However, P11 cautioned about the issue salience of a united Ireland for those in the Republic of Ireland:

I do think there's a divergence north and south in the sense that I think in the north, it is a much stronger mixture of the constitution and the social and economic. Whereas I think in the south, not that our voters in general don't have an aspiration to united Ireland, but I don't think it motivates them in terms of their electoral choices or certainly not to the same extent.

46 A united Ireland remains the core unfulfilled demand for Sinn Féin's people. But a united Ireland is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end. Sinn Féin manifestos speak, for example, of the economic benefits of a united Ireland:

The Six County<sup>1</sup> economy has failed. Partition has failed. The Six County economy is not viable in isolation from the rest of the island.

It has been held back through its dependence upon, and domination by, the British economy. (Sinn Féin 2007: 21)

A United Ireland in which the economy serves the needs of our people and not the other way around. (Sinn Féin 2020: 2)

- 47 However, for those in the Republic of Ireland in particular, there are more pressing, day to day issues, and chief among those for all participants from the Republic of Ireland was housing. The current crisis in housing in the Republic of Ireland, marked by a lack of affordable housing (Healy and Goldrick-Kelly 2018), is linked to the Celtic Tiger economy (Norris and Coates 2014) and its subsequent collapse. The state, which had traditionally been the major supplier of affordable housing, withdrew from provision of housing as the private sector moved in (Ó Broin 2019). Ultimately, this housing boom was a major driver in the collapse of the Celtic Tiger as banks and other lenders were left overexposed to the 2007 credit crunch (Norris and Coates 2014). The situation now, as Sinn Féin argue, is that housing is the primary concern for many people in the Republic of Ireland and a major driver in new support for the party. P9 made the argument that the housing crisis was key in attracting younger voters to Sinn Féin:

If you look at young people, I think their core-- I think what seems to be driving a lot of the politics here for younger people and people kind of out of the market seems to be the housing issue. And the kind of locked out generation.

- 48 Sinn Féin's 2020 manifesto had a programme for housing which centred around a large-scale programme of state house building (Sinn Féin 2020). The architect of this policy was Eoin Ó Broin and the thinking behind it can be found in his 2019 book, *Home*. Ó Broin discusses the history of housing in the Republic of Ireland, pointing to the right to land and housing as being a central tenant of republicanism throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and this right to shelter being part of the Democratic Programme as adopted by the Dáil Éireann when it first met in 1919 (Ó Broin 2019). He charts the move away from state provided housing in the 1970s and the dominant role of the private sector in providing housing leading, he argues, to the current crisis and calling for the policies which would become a core component of

the 2020 Sinn Féin manifesto. Housing can be seen as an unfulfilled demand and one that creates chains of equivalence not just between younger people for whom a lack of affordable housing is a priority, but also for their parents who are seeing their children let down by other parties. From citing the land reform tradition of republicans to the Dáil's Democratic Programme, Ó Broin (2019) argues that through the housing failure, Ireland has abandoned the core principles of both the state and of republicanism.

- 49 In terms of the diversity and heterogeneity of the people, participants were keen to emphasise the social inclusivity of Sinn Féin and its commitment to secularism. P9 argued:

We're not...especially in the south it's no longer a religious state with the Catholic Church. As you can see with the gay marriage referendum and the 8<sup>th</sup>,<sup>2</sup> it's a more secular open state and I feel like that's what Sinn Féin has really come to embody.

- 50 Sinn Féin has a recent record of campaigning for issues such as the legalisation of same-sex marriages and women's reproductive rights in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Sinn Féin has conflated such campaigns for sexual minority rights and reproductive rights with their own struggle in Northern Ireland as a minority group (Hayes and Nagle 2019) forging clear equivalential chains. This identification with other minority struggles was something P12 made clear:

We're campaigning, we're a revolutionary organisation or we're campaigning for social justice, for change. So that'll be in some of the areas mentioned: people's rights, LGBT rights. I mean, we campaigned for marriage equality, we campaigned for women's reproductive rights. And in those campaigns, you do forge a range of alliances with other people.

- 51 For participants in the Republic of Ireland, this inclusivity was particularly evident through their opposition to Direct Provision. Since 2000, the Republic of Ireland has housed all asylum seekers in Direct Provision reception centres where asylum seekers are given accommodation and a small weekly allowance. Direct Provision has been a source of considerable controversy with researchers highlighting the

poor conditions and health stresses caused by the system, especially on children (Moran *et al.* 2019). Sinn Féin's opposition to Direct Provision has been consistent in their manifestos since its inception (Sinn Féin 2016b).

- 52 Given the housing crisis in the Republic of Ireland, this could be a controversial, even unpopular policy among Sinn Féin's core support group, many of whom are, themselves, waiting for permanent accommodation. This was a point addressed in detail by P11:

It wouldn't be unusual for me to be talking to a really good family and they would be saying, 'Look, we don't have a problem with people from other countries but how is it that our kids have to wait so long?'. Now that's a really important moment of our political engagement, because the conversation I can have with that family and Sinn Féin can have with the community is that the reason why your son or daughter is waiting so long isn't because of the families coming out of Direct Provision; it's failure of the government to invest adequately in public housing, so why don't we all campaign together?

- 53 P11 works to form equivalence between those families coming out of Direct Provision and into housing and Irish families looking for housing to try and prevent blame and othering and, instead, unite for a common cause and against a common adversary: the government and its failure to provide housing.

- 54 Sinn Féin also make claims towards inclusivity in Northern Ireland. This is of particular importance given the ethno-nationalist divides in this region and Sinn Féin's historic link with the Provisional IRA and its support base coming from the Catholic republican community. However, Sinn Féin aim to demonstrate that their politics and, in particular, demand for a united Ireland should not be seen as a threat to the identity of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland as this manifesto section demonstrates:

The identities of all citizens must be respected and supported. This includes those who cherish their British identity. A united Ireland must and will deliver and be a place for all our citizens. (Sinn Féin 2015: 6)



55 P12, a Northern Irish politician, expressed similar inclusionary sentiments, arguing that Sinn Féin wanted to support those in the loyalist community in Northern Ireland:

And our constituency offices are open to anybody...We hope by demonstrating that we actually get people who've been loyalist working-class areas to question the type of political representation and leadership that they have had over the years.

56 Whether those in the loyalist community would ever consider themselves to be part of Sinn Féin's people is another matter entirely, but it is clear that in their conception of the people, ethnicity or ethno-nationalist status are not an issue.

57 In terms of the empty signifier, there is evidence that the empty signifier deployed by Sinn Féin is "republicanism". An argument could be made that "united Ireland" is the empty signifier used by Sinn Féin; however, their electoral appeal is based on far more than this, especially in the Republic of Ireland. We can see how republicanism as an empty signifier gives shape and meaning to the housing demands, for example. Ó Broin (2019) has argued that a right to housing was central to the pre-independence appeal of republicanism and this has now been abandoned by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. For Sinn Féin, solving the housing crisis is not simply the right thing to do, it is the republican thing to do. This can also be seen in the demand for a united Ireland. Sinn Féin make the case for a united Ireland as being of political, economic and social benefit to the people of Ireland: "Almost 100 years, after the imposition of partition it is clear that it has failed all of our people politically, socially and economically." (Sinn Féin 2016a: 6) Yet despite these benefits that Sinn Féin claim, the call to unite Ireland can truly be understood through the empty signifier of republicanism.

58 Finally, there is the identity of the elite to consider. With Sinn Féin, there is both an internal and external elite, the internal elite being the duopoly of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and the external elite is the British state and the unionist parties of Northern Ireland who support that state. P10 summarised this as: "Just to say that these opponents are Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, DUP, British Government. British unionism and the old forces of reaction." This was expanded upon by P12

who argued: “Clearly, the northern state was never fair. It discriminated on sectarian grounds and political grounds. The southern state has never been fair in that the kind of wealthy elites have controlled the country and controlled it and run it in their own interests.”

- 59 In terms of the external elite, the British state and its unionist supporters, participants saw this as less salient than the internal elite. P11 discussed core differences between the people of Ireland and the British elite saying: “We don’t have an aristocracy. We don’t have a history of landed gentry. We don’t have a lordship.” In terms of those who supported the elite in Northern Ireland, the unionist and loyalist communities, participants were almost sympathetic to them with P12 saying:

I mean, obviously, in the north in particular, when you get into the likes of loyalists in working-class estates ...we absolutely offer support to-- and we like to think that the policies we pursue in terms of fairness and social support apply equally to those areas as they do to working-class nationalist areas.

- 60 It is to the internal elite that Sinn Féin direct most of their attention. P10 was scathing towards Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael:

You have kind of two parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that essentially see themselves-- the same neoliberal policies. They essentially see themselves as kind of managers of our society...These are two groups and one of them’s kind of old money and the other one’s new money. There’s very little difference between them.

- 61 P10 summed this up by dismissing these parties as “two cheeks of the same arse”.

- 62 This difference between the duopoly of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and Sinn Féin is linked, fundamentally, to how their republicanism (or lack of) is manifested. For Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil are acknowledged as a republican party but it is a weakened republicanism that ignores what Sinn Féin believe to be the critical economic and redistributive elements of republicanism such as housing. P11 argued that “Fianna Fáil gets squeezed because they’re trying to straddle both horses of half a foot in the Fine Gael centre-right camp half a foot in their kind of republican quasi-social democratic camp”, while P12 argued that Fine

Gael were not republican at all: “Fine Gael are a partitionist party. They're not interested in a united Ireland. They exist to serve and maintain the 26-county state,<sup>3</sup> and that's a very fundamental difference between ourselves and themselves. They're much more like a unionist party in that respect.”

63 Inasmuch as we can see Irish republicanism as a set of values, the difference between the values of the people and elite for Sinn Féin is clear.

## 6. Discussion

64 The theoretical approach advanced by this paper points towards a heterogenous people bound by multiple demands which emerge from their values, unified by an empty signifier and prevented from fulfilling their demands by an elite with opposing values.

65 The people of both the SNP and Sinn Féin display a strong heterogeneity. The SNP make repeated claims to represent all of Scotland and while participants made no claims towards specific inclusion of marginalised groups, it can be surmised that by including everyone in Scotland within their people this includes the marginalised too. The SNP has a cross-class appeal and its lack of the traditional class-based support of Labour and Conservatives has been turned to a strength. The SNP argue that only they can represent all of Scotland.

66 Sinn Féin had a narrower conception of the people, primarily composed of the economically excluded of Ireland with a specific appeal towards the marginalised such as LGBTQI+ communities and refugees. Nevertheless, there exists as strong heterogeneity to both peoples. On initial sight Sinn Féin do appear to have a class-based appeal. However, this is expanded beyond the working class to those all those who Sinn Féin believe have been failed by governments in Ireland.

67 There are also similarities in the demands of both inasmuch as they remain unfulfilled and so provide equivalence and unity to the people and there are similarities in the empty signifiers in that they provide shape and meaning to the demands.

- 68 There are also differences between the cases. Starting, again, with the people, the SNP make multiple arguments about common values as evidenced in both participant and manifesto data. It is worth noting, though, that despite SNP claims for egalitarian Scottish values, the recent SNP leadership election saw over 47 per cent of their membership vote for Kate Forbes (BBC News Online 2023a) whose policies over issues such as abortion and LGBT rights demonstrated a strong, faith-derived conservatism (BBC News Online 2023b), indicating that the SNP membership might not be so united in these values.
- 69 The demands of the people give rise to a unity, but the demands come from common and core values which also give a unity to the people. For the SNP, just as the people are universal, so too are the demands. Sinn Féin are more nuanced: they make no claim for universal values in the same manner that the SNP do, even, for example, that not all of their supporters are in favour of a united Ireland.
- 70 However, on closer examination, when we consider republicanism as a set of values, the values-based appeal is as central to Sinn Féin as it is to the SNP. The core policies of Sinn Féin are rooted in their own republican values, as has been seen in the housing policy, for example, where Ó Broin (2019) advances the argument that public housing is a core republican value.
- 71 There are also differences in the unfulfilled demands. For the SNP, we can see that independence is the primary demand and has primary salience over other demands; it is through the fulfilment of this demand that all the other demands can be met and that the values of Scotland can be truly realised. With Sinn Féin, participants acknowledged that, while a United Ireland remained their core demand, it lacked salience over more pressing concerns for their supporters such as housing. So, while Sinn Féin's core demand is a possible path towards other demands being fulfilled, and they make the case for the economic benefits of reunification repeatedly in manifestos, unlike the SNP it is not the only path to demand fulfilment.
- 72 The final core difference is in the nature of the empty signifier. With the SNP it represents their core demand, the route to and unifier of their other demands. With Sinn Féin it, too, represents the route to and unifier of their demands without being a demand in itself.

- 73 Returning, finally, to the similarities, the most striking similarity is that both parties have sought to broaden the meaning of “the people”. The SNP’s cross-class universalism gives them a people that encompasses, as we have seen, all of Scotland, and while not all Sinn Féin participants claimed to represent all of Ireland, we have seen how they have still sought to expand their people from the traditional working class support in both Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland to now include others who may have been ignored or let down by the dominant parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the south and by unionist and Westminster politics of the north, such as the precarious middle classes, LGBTQI+ communities and refugees. Indeed, we have seen how Sinn Féin even have ambitions towards working class loyalist communities in the North. Rather than excluding groups from their people, as right-wing nationalist movements do, both of these parties have worked to include as many groups as possible within their conception of the people; immigrants, for example, are not seen as enemies but potential supporters.
- 74 How the two parties do this appears to differ. With the SNP, it is all down to residency, as we have seen; living in Scotland means you are part of the people of Scotland. Whether every resident of Scotland would agree with this is unsure, yet the SNP make this claim. For Sinn Féin, it is a matter of deliberate outreach to these communities and an attempt to build equivalential alliances between them.
- 75 In terms of differences between the nationalisms of each case, while both currently present an inclusionary nationalism, it would be dishonest to ignore the history of Sinn Féin. As the political wing of the provisional wing of the IRA, for over 25 years they advanced their aims through armed violence. While Sinn Féin are committed to the peace process – something participants emphasised – this history marks a clear difference between them and the SNP.
- 76 There are noticeable differences within the elites too. The SNP’s elite is entirely external with participants advancing the arguments that, due to the egalitarian values of Scotland, elites are fundamentally incompatible with Scottish values. Sinn Féin, though, while having an external elite in the shape of the British state, pay less attention to this than to the internal elite of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. However, the issue of value incompatibility remains. Sinn Féin do not discuss

Irish values as such but, rather, they discuss republican values. Yet given that modern republicanism stems from the 1916 Proclamation and that this is the foundational document of the Irish state, we can consider these as national values, at least in the eyes of Sinn Féin. Therefore, with Sinn Féin's rejection of Fianna Fáil as insufficiently republican and Fine Gael as not republican at all, it can be argued that Sinn Féin, similar to the SNP, see themselves as the sole guardians of the national values of their country, albeit phrased less explicitly than the SNP.

- 77 Returning to the two arguments advanced by this paper, that examining the centrality of values to nationalist parties helps us to understand how these parties gain and maintain support and that Laclau's theories of populism can also be applied to certain forms of nationalist movements to reveal new insights, what has been learned in this regard?
- 78 The centrality of values to both the SNP and Sinn Féin is evident, with both parties claiming (either explicitly or implicitly) that they are the sole guardians of the national values of their country, either in the form of the egalitarian values of Scotland or the socialist republicanism of Ireland.
- 79 There is also a clear clash of values between both the people, as conceptualised by the two parties, and the identified elites. We can see how the articulation of these values, framed as core national values that have an incompatibility with the values of the elite, is used to drive support.
- 80 Equally, it is evident that the demands of the people are, for the SNP and Sinn Féin, intrinsically linked to their values. The SNP's people want to live in an independent, egalitarian nation, which is derived from the Scottish values the SNP argue for. Sinn Féin's people demand housing, which is rooted in the republican values of land reform and of sweeping away the colonialism of the UK.
- 81 In terms of what Laclau's theories of populism can tell us about these two parties, the primary aspect is the heterogeneity of the people. Looking at the SNP and Sinn Féin through the lens of the ideational approach, with its emphasis on the homogeneity of the people (Mudde 2004), it would be difficult, almost impossible, to view the

SNP and Sinn Féin as populist parties. However, when the Laclauan approach is used, the populism of the SNP and Sinn Féin is far more evident. We see a diverse, heterogenous people bound together with unfulfilled demands, with these demands being rooted in national values, filling the nationalist component of their nationalist inclusionary populist appeal.

- 82 Having identified the parties as populist through this approach, it can then be seen how they use a populist logic of an excluded people being denied their demands by an excluding elite, both internal and external, and position themselves as the sole path towards fulfilling these demands. Furthermore, the use of the empty signifier allows for a deeper understanding of how these parties frame their discourse and demands.
- 83 Finally, the identification of a populist elite allows us to understand how both parties frame their politics as a clash of values with the opposing values of the elite, meaning that the people, most notably in Scotland, are denied politics that represent their own values.

## 7. Conclusion

- 84 In many respects, this paper has only scratched the surface of framing the SNP and Sinn Féin as inclusionary populist parties and exploring new avenues of analysis and understanding and it is intended to encourage more research into these parties through the lenses of inclusionary populism and values, as well as research into similar parties such as Plaid Cymru and ERC of Catalonia. One particular limitation of this paper is that it has not been able to make particular linkage between their populist logic and their electoral success. This is an area where mixed-methods and quantitative analysis could help in this regard.
- 85 Equally, the paper highlighted the difference in salience of Sinn Féin's united Ireland goal in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The 2014 Scottish independence referendum showed strong No votes in the North-East of Scotland, traditional SNP strongholds, and so why there is this discrepancy is worthy of further research. Furthermore, research into whether these parties' conception of the values

of their supporters and the reality of their values is in alignment demands more investigation.

86 Nevertheless, it is hoped that this paper will provide both insight and inspiration.

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## Appendix 1 – Participants

### Interview participants

Party	Code	Demographic	Age	Role
SNP	P1	Male	50-70	Councillor
SNP	P2	Male	30-49	MSP
SNP	P3	Male	50-70	Former party Chief Executive
SNP	P4	Male	30-49	MP
SNP	P5	Female	18-29	Former member of staff
SNP	P6	Female	30-49	Councillor
SNP	P7	Male	18-29	Activist
Sinn Féin	P8	Male Northern Ireland	50-70	Former MLA
Sinn Féin	P9	Male Republic of Ireland	18-29	Sinn Féin activist
Sinn Féin	P10*	Male Republic of Ireland	18-29	Member of party staff
Sinn Féin	P11*	Male Republic of Ireland	30-49	TD
Sinn Féin	P12*	Male Northern Ireland	50-70	MLA
Sinn Féin	P13*	Male Republic of Ireland	18-29	Sinn Féin activist
Sinn Féin	P14*	Female Republic of Ireland	18-29	Member of staff
Sinn Féin	P15*	Male Republic of Ireland	18-29	Ogra Shinn Féin Activist

\* Indicates the interviews took place during the Covid pandemic

## Appendix 2: Manifestos analysed

Party	Title	Election	Year
SNP	If Scotland Matters To You, Make It Matter In May	Westminster	2005
SNP	It's Time	Scottish Parliament	2007
SNP	Elect a Local Champion	Westminster	2010
SNP	Stronger for Scotland	Scottish Parliament	2011
SNP	Stronger for Scotland	Westminster	2015
SNP	Re-elect	Scottish Parliament	2016
SNP	Stronger for Scotland	Westminster	2017

<b>SNP</b>	Stronger for Scotland	Westminster	2019
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Delivering For Ireland's Future	Northern Ireland Assembly	2007
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Peace, Equality, Jobs, Unity	Westminster	2010
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Leadership Across Ireland	Northern Ireland Assembly	2010
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	There Is A Better Way	Dáil	2011
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Equality Not Austerity	Westminster	2015
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	For A Fair Recovery	Dáil	2016
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Better With Sinn Féin	Northern Ireland Assembly	2016
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Equality, Respect, Integrity	Northern Ireland Assembly	2017
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	No Brexit, No Border, No Tory Cuts	Westminster	2017
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Time for Unity	Westminster	2019
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	Give Workers And Families A Break	Dáil	2020

## Appendix 3: Questions asked to participants

Introduction – Can you briefly outline your history within your movement? What did you do before politics? What attracted you to politics?

Goals – What are the political goals of your movement? How do you seek to achieve them? Has your party being in government impacted upon your goals and, if so, how?

Who are your support? – Who do you believe that you represent? How do you believe that you represent them? Do you feel that your movement represents those ignored by other political parties? What do you believe are the core values of your supporters? Why do they support your movement? How important is improving the economic circumstances of the electorate? Do you believe that you particularly appeal to the economically excluded? Do you believe your movement to be part of the political mainstream? What messages do you use to engage with your supporters? Do you believe it is important to use positive messages? How do you feel about using negative messages? How do you engage with those who aren't your supporters? Do you believe that your role is to lead the people or follow them? Do you believe that you have politicised or re-politicised people? How has being in government impacted upon your ability to gain and maintain support?

Who are your competitors? – Who would you consider your political competitors and opponents? What do you believe their values are? Why are these values incompatible with yours? Do you believe there is such a thing as an “elite”? If so, who are they and what do they represent?

Plurality – Which movements, domestically and internationally, do you feel an affinity with and why? Which movements would you be willing to work with, formally or informally, to achieve your aims? Which movements could you never work with? What are your red-line issues when it comes to working with other movements?

Populism – What do you understand by the term “populist”? Have you heard of the term inclusionary populist? Would you consider your party to be inclusionary populist?

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1 “Six Counties” refers to Northern Ireland, composed of the six counties of Fermanagh, Armagh, Tyrone, (London)Derry, Antrim and Down.

2 The 8<sup>th</sup> refers to the successful 2018 campaign to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Irish Constitution which prohibited abortion. Sinn Féin played an active role in the campaign.

3 The Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland has a further six counties and republicans will talk of a 32-county state to refer to Irish reunification.

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## English

The concept of the “people” is at the heart of populism studies. Who they are, where they come from, what their demands are, what unites them and who are their antagonistic elite are all critical components. While there is growing literature examining these issues in regard to the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Sinn Féin, there are still significant gaps in the literature. This paper uses the theories of Laclau and evidence from elite interviews and manifesto analysis, applying a comparative approach to the SNP and Sinn Féin to understand the strategies of these parties in building and maintaining heterogenous support across multiple identities. In doing so, it argues that applying Laclau’s discursive approach to populism can reveal much about how populist nationalist parties use both values and demands to advance their causes.

## **Français**

Le concept de « peuple » est au cœur des études sur le populisme. Qui il est, d'où il vient, quelles sont ses revendications, ce qui l'unit et quelle est son élite antagoniste sont autant d'éléments cruciaux. Bien qu'il y ait de plus en plus de travaux qui examinent ces questions en ce qui concerne le Scottish National Party (SNP) et le Sinn Féin, il y a encore des lacunes importantes dans la littérature. Cet article s'appuie sur les théories de Laclau et sur des données issues d'entretiens avec des élites politiques et de l'analyse des programmes électoraux, en appliquant une approche comparative au SNP et au Sinn Féin afin de comprendre les stratégies de ces partis visant à construire et à maintenir un soutien hétérogène à travers des identités multiples. Ce faisant, il soutient que l'application de l'approche discursive de Laclau au populisme peut révéler beaucoup de choses sur la façon dont les partis nationalistes populistes utilisent à la fois les valeurs et les revendications pour faire avancer leurs causes.

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## **Mots-clés**

populisme, SNP, Sinn Féin, Nationalisme, parti politique

## **Keywords**

populism, SNP, Sinn Féin, nationalism, political party

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## **Michael Scanlan**

Lecturer in Politics, School of Social and Political Sciences, Adam Smith Building,  
University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8RT