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The politics of abstentionism: Comparing Sinn Féin's Westminster abstentionism to the Basque Nationalist Left's engagement with the Spanish Parliament, 1979–2025

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Abstract

Irish Republicans and the Basque Nationalist Left have been close allies throughout conflict and peace. One previous commonality was that their left-wing political wings Sinn Féin and Batasuna refused to participate in the British or Spanish parliament. For over a century, Sinn Féin has abstained from Westminster. In contrast, a new Basque left group Euskal Herria Bildu (EH Bildu) decided to consistently take their seats in Madrid. Utilising various sources including interviews with Irish Republicans and left-wing Basque Nationalists, we explore why the Basque Nationalist Left has abandoned abstentionism, in contrast to Sinn Féin's position towards Westminster. Ultimately, different historical and contemporary factors produce contrasting strategies. These include the fact that Sinn Féin secured the right to Irish self-determination while Basques have not, and public opinion. This study provides a unique comparison on why some nationalist parties abstain from political institutions if elected while others end that tactic.

Keywords

Abstentionism, Basque Country, Basque politics, Batasuna, British politics, Cortes Generales, EH Bildu, Irish politics, Northern Irish politics, Sinn Féin, Spanish politics, Westminster

Introduction

Irish Republican party Sinn Féin are the most prominent mainstream separatist party in Europe consistently abstaining from the parliament of the nation-state that they wish to leave. Their left-wing nationalist allies in the Basque Country previously abstained from the Spanish parliament. Cullen's insightful history of Basque Nationalist Left and Irish

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Republican interactions argues both at times 'shared abstentionist principles'. In fact, the Basque Nationalist Left's 'decision to abstain from taking seats in certain elections [during the recent Basque conflict] was directly inspired by the Irish republican . . . example' (Cullen, 2024: 177). As Lynn suggests, abstentionism for Sinn Féin historically involved 'refusing to recognise or sit in any parliament or assembly associated with British rule' in Ireland (Lynn, 2002: 74). This definition can equally apply to the Basque situation in contemporary history: abstentionism in the Irish and Basque contexts involved 'refusing to recognise or sit in any parliament . . . associated with British/Spanish/French rule'. An additional element in the Basque situation at times, and for Sinn Féin before 1981, was a refusal to participate in elections to try to delegitimise Spanish or British rule. Our article explores both forms of abstentionism – refusal to participate in elections and a refusal to take seats in state-wide institutions. We explore an under-researched phenomenon in European politics: why has abstention from a nation-state's parliament been sustained by one separatist group (Irish Republicans) but has been ended by another (the Basque Nationalist Left)? The continuation of abstentionism (Sinn Féin) and rejection of it (the Basque Nationalist Left) matters because it influences British, Irish, Spanish and Basque politics – especially as Sinn Féin and the Basque Nationalist Left now have (and previously had) considerable electoral support. Other questions we interact with include: how has public opinion, electoral performances, armed campaigns and peace processes influenced both movements' abstentionism towards the Spanish and British parliaments?

There were many links of solidarity between Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA; 'Basque homeland and liberty') and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Both left-wing separatist groups utilised political violence to try to achieve self-determination from the 1970s (Maillot, 2005: 2; Ó Dochartaigh, 2021; Cullen, 2024: 136–289). Initially, there were also similarities between their political wings' abstentionist policies (Cullen, 2024: 177). Active participation in elections through abstentionism commenced in the early 1980s for modern-day Sinn Féin, the IRA's political wing, at a time when the IRA's campaign raged (earlier manifestations of the party abstained from the British parliament in Westminster from 1918). The party ended abstention to the Irish and Northern Irish parliaments by 1998 but maintains it for Westminster. The corresponding political wings of ETA emerged under various guises, including Herri Batasuna (HB), Batasuna and Euskal Herritarrok (EH). They at times asked their supporters to spoil their ballots for Spanish elections, or to support representatives who would not attend the Spanish parliament (the Cortes) if elected, or to abstain from Spanish elections altogether (Maillot, 2005: 4–5). However, Batasuna's descendent Sortu, which currently participates in the coalition EH Bildu with other smaller social-democratic nationalist parties, not only takes its seats in the Cortes but has helped sustain left-wing Spanish governments led by PSOE (the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party). This article explores why Irish Republicans sustain abstentionism to Westminster while their Basque left-wing nationalist allies abandoned it for the Cortes. We suggest various historical and contemporary explanations.

While this research on their comparative abstentionism is original, there are three streams in the current literature with which we interact. The first involves studies that demonstrate the validity of comparing Irish Republicanism and the Basque Nationalist Left. Maillot (2005) offers rich insight on their historic and continual affinity up to 2005. Camaraderie exists because both wanted self-determination and previously utilised armed methods to achieve it (Maillot, 2005: 2–4). On abstentionism, Maillot explains that 'Batasuna and Sinn Féin followed similar . . . strategies, although . . . taking exactly opposite directions'. Initially, Sinn Féin abstained from all Irish and British parliaments.

By 1998, its representatives took their seats in the Irish parliament and in the new Northern Ireland Assembly, but continue abstaining from taking seats in Westminster. In contrast, Batasuna at first stood for elections to the Spanish parliament in Madrid but abstained from taking their seats if elected. By 2000, they asked their supporters to abstain from voting to protest against self-determination being denied to Basques (Maillot, 2005: 4–5). Maillot notes a further significant difference between both situations: 'the right of the Basque people to self-determination . . . is impossible under the Spanish constitution' (Maillot, 2005: 7). This point helps us to understand why Basque Nationalist Left representatives decided from 2011 to take their seats if elected to the Cortes to try at least to get recognition that Spain is a federal or confederal state. Sinn Féin do not face this dilemma. The British Government accepted the principle of Irish self-determination by 1998 (Cullen, 2024: 221–249; Duhart, 2016: 31–32, 57).

Irvin's insightful *Militant Nationalism* (1999) compared Sinn Féin and HB. While acknowledging important differences between the two conflicts, she shows a complex interplay of reasons that explain why Irish Republicans and Basque Nationalists Left connect their experiences. They shared a sense of being denied self-determination alongside left-wing nationalist philosophies (Irvin, 1999). Both movements sought political engagement at a local level but rejected participation in the British or Spanish parliaments to contest the legitimacy of British or Spanish sovereignty (Irvin, 1999: 10, 35, 45, 119–121, 158, 175, 196; see also Keating, 2001; Woodworth, 2001).

Cullen's recent fascinating history of the 'transnational nexus' between Irish Republicans and the Basque Nationalist Left demonstrates their connection up to 2011 (Cullen, 2024: 304). This solidarity emerged because of 'shared ideology, movement needs . . . shared political culture' (Cullen, 2024: 304). They resonated in being left-wing nationalists engaged in conflict against what they saw as oppressive rulers (primarily Britain and Spain). For Cullen: 'demands for Irish and Basque self-determination became the rhetorical keystone of . . . solidarity' (Cullen, 2024: 304–309). He briefly suggests the Basque Nationalist Left learnt its abstentionist strategies from Sinn Féin (Cullen, 2024: 177–178).

Elsewhere, Jonathan Powell (Tony Blair's Chief of Staff, former CEO of Inter-Mediate and currently UK National Security Adviser) recalls Irish Republicans supporting the Basque Nationalist Left during the Basque peace process (Powell, 2015: 91–92, 100, 124, 250–251, 272, 280–281). Contestations of self-determination rights were central to both conflicts, creating affinity between the groups (Powell, 2015: 130–131). While these authors justify comparing both cases, their focus was not on considering their contrasting abstentionist strategies. Equally, their work is either outdated and/or does not comment on EH Bildu's participation in Madrid.

A second group of authors discuss Sinn Féin's previous abstention to the Oireachtas (Irish houses of parliament in Dublin), Stormont (Northern Ireland's Assembly in Belfast) and to a lesser degree Westminster (since 1918). What is missing is detailed insight into why Sinn Féin continues abstention from Westminster, despite abandoning it for the Oireachtas in 1986 and Stormont in 1998 (e.g. see Evans and Tonge, 2012; Feeney, 2002; Lynn, 2001, 2002; Moore, 2023: 12, 38–39; Maillot, 2005: 7–12, 16–17, 24–28; English, 2012: 107, 250–252, 299; Moloney, 2007: 287–298; White, 2017: 64–70, 222–232, 298–301; Frampton, 2009: 11–12, 22, 65–68, 132). Murray and Tonge do suggest that some Republicans say abstaining from Westminster is not a principle but rather 'there was no strategic value in going to Westminster'. Other Republicans 'offered a more traditional view' about refusing to take oaths to foreign monarchs (Murray and Tonge, 2005:

227–228). This article will evaluate whether Sinn Féin's abstention to Westminster is a tactic, a principle, or both. Whiting convincingly suggests 'Sinn Féin retains features of an anti-establishment party by continuing to abstain from Westminster' (Whiting, 2016: 548–549). De Bréadún mentions former Sinn Féin northern leader Martin McGuinness arguing that devolution makes Westminster redundant in northern affairs, and that northern MPs do not matter mathematically in terms of seats in Westminster. De Bréadún predicted that reform of Westminster could see Sinn Féin end abstention (De Bréadún, 2015: 67, 81). We explain why this prediction is so far inaccurate. Our article expands on other historical and contemporary explanations for their abstention. Other media items underplay either the historical or the short-term justifications for Sinn Féin's continued abstention from Westminster (Blevins, 2024; Foster, 2019; Robinson, 2024; Swan, 2018a); particularly those suggesting it is an outdated strategy that will result in electoral setbacks (Emerson, 2024; Rodgers, 2019; Swan, 2018b). The latter opinion is questionable. Sinn Féin topped Northern Ireland's Westminster election results in 2024.

The third stream of literature involves authors who consider ETA's rise and demise, and, to a lesser extent, its political wings (for studies suggesting that ETA were pressurised into peace by security pressure, see Alonso, 2011; Bew et al., 2009; Muro, 2020; for the more convincing view that the Basque Nationalist Left had a greater influence on ETA's conclusion alongside other factors, see Whitfield, 2014: 230, 280–298; Cullen, 2024: 277–284; Powell, 2015: 22–25, 252; English, 2016: 203–219; Murua, 2016). Whitfield's nuanced analysis does briefly detail how HB participated in elections after 1979 'but [chose] not to occupy the institutional positions' (Whitfield, 2014: 65). It was a strategic shift when Batasuna's successors after 2011 permanently took their seats in the Cortes (Whitfield, 2014: 281). Whitfield is right that understanding the Basque Nationalist Left is important. They represent an influential element within Basque and Spanish politics (Whitfield, 2014: 9–10, 15). She also catalogues their solidarity with Sinn Féin (Whitfield, 2014: 42, 65–66, 87–88, 143, 160–163, 218, 260, 318), justifying our comparison. Elsewhere, Superti (2020) outlines how Batasuna promoted boycotting voting in the early 2000s in protest at the party being outlawed. None of these studies analyse the adoption and sidelining of abstentionism by the Basque Nationalist Left.

This unique study tries to understand why two prominent left-wing nationalist parties in Europe have adopted different strategies towards abstention from the parliaments of states that they wish to leave. Utilising various sources including interviews with Basque left-wing nationalists, Sinn Féin representatives and other Irish Republicans, we suggest that a combination of long-term and short-term factors explains the contrast. Long-term reasons include that abstention from Westminster has been politically successful for Sinn Féin but produced mixed results for the Basque Nationalist Left; Irish Republicans frame Westminster as a colonial power; and memory of the Spanish Civil War helps motivate EH Bildu to accept Spanish left-wing alliances. Contemporary factors include that: Sinn Féin has secured the right to Irish self-determination while Basques have not; abstentionism remains politically successful for Irish Republicans; EH Bildu can have a greater influence on Spanish politics due to its proportional electoral system and the recent demise of single-party governments; 18 northern Irish MPs have little impact on Westminster; and that EH Bildu is trying to become the Spanish government's Basque political ally in Madrid instead of the PNV (the centre-right Basque Nationalist party, the Partido Nacionalista Vasco–Eusko Alderdi Jeltzalea) – the situation is different in the Basque Country's government, where the PNV currently governs with PSOE.

In the first section, we justify the comparison by exploring the groups' continued solidarity. The second section explains Sinn Féin's abstention from Westminster, before our final section details the Basque Nationalist Left's evolving stance on abstention from the Cortes. We cross-reference multiple sources, including our semi-structured interviews with personnel from the Basque Nationalist Left, Sinn Féin and Irish Republican former prisoners (those in favour of and those against Sinn Féin), alongside memoirs, election manifestos, and political literature. We follow best practice with interview research by cross-checking the accuracy of interviewee accounts with multiple sources (a point applicable to any research utilising potentially partisan sources; see Slote Grele, 1998: 40–41; Morris, 2009) to establish core reasons for their abstentionist policies. We explain the contrasting approaches to abstentionism, rather than critique or justify them. Basque interviewees are anonymised at interviewees' requests.

Solidarity between Sinn Féin and the Basque Nationalist Left

There has been close cooperation between left-wing Basque nationalists and Irish Republicans historically (Cullen, 2024: 138–310; Irvin, 1999; Maillot, 2005). This affinity has continued following Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Cullen, 2024: 240–293; Whitfield, 2014: 160–163, 218, 260, 318). For example, in March 1997, Gerry Adams, former long-serving President of Sinn Féin, wrote to the Spanish Government demanding that HB's leaders were released from custody (An Phoblacht, 1997). On 24 September 1998, the Irish Republican newspaper, *An Phoblacht*, carried an interview with Esther Agirre, a HB national executive member, where she thanked 'Gerry Adams, our great colleague' for supporting a Basque peace process (An Phoblacht, 1998a).

One *An Phoblacht* article stands out for the purposes of this article. On 4 November 1999, the paper reported Arnaldo Otegi, a HB senior member (now General Secretary of EH Bildu), as saying that the party had 'decided not to contest the Spanish general election' in 2000 to protest against Basques being denied self-determination (An Phoblacht, 1999). This abstentionism resonated with Irish Republican's refusal to take seats in Westminster. Their bond was further demonstrated when Sinn Féin spoke against Otegi's arrest by Spanish authorities in 2007 (An Phoblacht, 2007) and in 2010 (An Phoblacht, 2010; Cullen, 2024: 280–282). Adams and other leading Sinn Féin members called for Batasuna (and its later manifestation Sortu) to be legalised and for the Spanish Government to engage with a peace process (An Phoblacht, 2011). Later, in November 2012, Sinn Féin demanded 'Otegi and his comrades. . .who. . .seek to chart a new peaceful. . . course to Basque freedom. . .be released' (An Phoblacht, 2012). Irish Republicans hold Otegi in such high esteem that a mural demanding his release featured on the Republican mural wall in west Belfast in 2013 (An Phoblacht, 2013; Cullen, 2024: 281). A mural calling for Basque self-determination was also later included (An Phoblacht, 2015). HB equally valued Sinn Féin, whom they consulted repeatedly during Basque peace talks from the 1990s (Whitfield, 2014: 143, 160–163, 218, 260, 318; Cullen, 2024: 195–289).

Sinn Féin and EH Bildu work together in the European Parliament (An Phoblacht, 2014, 2018). And in May 2023, Declan Kearney, Sinn Féin Northern Assembly member and National Chairperson, was welcomed by Otegi and EH Bildu to celebrations for Aberri Eguna, the Basque national day. Kearney commented: 'Ireland and the Basque Country have a historic friendship' (An Phoblacht, 2023).

Their main points of convergence include that both are striving for self-determination, a left-wing nationalist ethos and their previous use of armed methods (Cullen, 2024: 142–310; Irvin, 1999; Maillot, 2005). Despite these similarities, the Basque Nationalist Left adopted and then sidelined abstentionism to the Cortes. That contrasts with Sinn Féin's consistent non-participation in Westminster (Maillot, 2005). The rest of our article explains this contrast, beginning with Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin's abstention from Westminster

This section explores the historical background of Sinn Féin's abstention from Westminster, followed by the long and short-term factors sustaining it. Republican interviewees' comparative perspective on the Basque Nationalist Left's abstentionist strategies are also noted.

Historical background

Various authors have explained why historically Sinn Féin abstained from taking seats in Westminster, the Northern Irish Assembly and the Oireachtas in Dublin (see, for example, Cullen, 2024: 136; English, 2012: 107, 250–252, 299; Maillot, 2005: 7–12, 16–17, 24–28). Abstentionism was first advocated by Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Féin, in the early 1900s. It copied Hungarian nationalists opposed to Austrian rule (Maillot, 2005: 8). The Irish Republican policy of abstention gained momentum following the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, when Republicans staged an uprising against British rule and declared a Republic. British forces quickly crushed the rebellion. In the rebels' eyes, persistent Irish uprisings against British rule since the 1500s alongside the 'usurpation' of Ireland by British forces justified armed resistance (CAIN, 1916). By 1918, Sinn Féin decided they would stand for election to Westminster. If elected, they would not take their seats. Instead, they would create an independent Irish parliament. The strategy worked: they won a majority of seats in Ireland during the United Kingdom's general election in 1918. But the independent Irish parliament was declared illegal by Britain. At this point, an earlier manifestation of the IRA commenced rebellion against British rule (Feeney, 2002: 102, 131–133).

The (southern) Irish War of Independence ended with a settlement between a majority within Sinn Féin and the British Government in 1921. Southern Ireland began its journey towards a republic after being granted dominion status in 1922. But the treaty partitioned the island. Six north-eastern Irish counties remained in the United Kingdom as desired by the new Ulster Unionist British Protestant majority there. The Irish Civil War followed between pro- and anti-treaty IRA factions, with the former emerging victorious. Many anti-treaty members eventually joined Irish politics by the late 1920s via Fianna Fáil. However, a rump IRA and Sinn Féin continued to abstain from *all* 'partitionist' institutions in Belfast, Dublin and Westminster (with few electoral successes bar the 1950s; see Maillot, 2005: 12–16).

In 1969, the IRA and Sinn Féin split over abstentionism. What became the minority Republican movement, the 'Officials', ended abstention. The Provisionals (referred to as the IRA and Sinn Féin hereafter), rejected ending abstentionism and the non-defence of Irish Catholics from attacks by Unionists and the British state in Northern Ireland (Maillot, 2005: 16–19). The IRA and Sinn Féin fought against British forces to try to dilute or end

British rule in Northern Ireland (Leahy, 2020, 2025; Ó Dochartaigh, 2021). Sinn Féin initially boycotted elections partly because they were outlawed in Northern Ireland until 1974 (Leahy, 2020: 54). They only participated in these elections following the success of IRA hunger strikers, being elected on a platform of prisoners' rights in 1981. Gerry Adams was elected thereafter as a Sinn Féin abstentionist MP in 1983 (Maillot, 2005: 21–26). In 1986, Sinn Féin and the IRA ended abstention to the Oireachtas. Adams told the party's Ard Fheis (annual conference) in 1986: 'It is a massive mistake, to presume that our republican [abstentionist] attitude to . . . [the Irish parliament] is shared by any more than a very small section of . . . [Irish] people' (CAIN, 1986). With British Protestants at that time having an inbuilt majority in Northern Ireland, and with the IRA not receiving the majority of northern nationalist support, Republicans needed electoral support in the Republic to try to press the British towards self-determination (O'Brien, 1999: 118–131).

When the IRA concluded its campaign and Sinn Féin signed the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, they accepted participating in a new power-sharing Assembly in Belfast. Adams acknowledged that devolution was not something Republicans wanted. However, '[w]e couldn't expect the unionists to agree to anything else, and the two governments [British and Irish] . . . [and] crucially the SDLP were on board'. In 1998, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) remained the main Irish nationalist party in Northern Ireland. As Unionists were the majority in the population, and the IRA's campaign against British forces had reached a stalemate, Republicans could not veto devolution returning (Adams, 2003: 394).

However, Sinn Féin continues its abstention to Westminster. They argue that attending Stormont and the Oireachtas is different because Irish politics 'were now to be determined initially by the population of the entire island' (Murray and Tonge, 2005: 234–235). Tommy McKearney, a former Irish Republican prisoner and author turned critic of Sinn Féin, concurs: 'With Westminster, they see no need to change. In contrast, there is a significant portion of Irish Republicans that see no need for abstention from the institutions based in Ireland' (McKearney interview, 2024). Danny Morrison, a former Sinn Féin publicity director and author, agrees:

> Leinster House and Stormont, for all their many flaws, are assemblies of the people of this island . . . I am in the business of building a new society in Ireland out of the two states which currently exist. To do that I need to win over a significant body of support from the unionist community, as well as winning over people in the South who have lived for a century under successive partitionist governments. (Morrison, 2017)

Jim Gibney, veteran Sinn Féin strategist, echoes this view: 'Our focus is on Ireland and developing the institutions . . . north and south, making sure . . . people . . . are given . . . effective political representation' (Gibney interview, 2025). Westminster is viewed differently. Abstention continues there for various long and short-term reasons.

Long-term factors

Sinn Féin maintains its historical rejection of Britain's right to determine Irish affairs. McKearney suggests the party maintains that 'Westminster . . . has no right to have writ over any part of Ireland' (McKearney interview, 2024). For Morrison, the party's philosophy goes back to:

> 1918 [when] Sinn Féin stood on an abstentionist policy . . . implementing the Republic . . . declared in 1916 . . . It was . . . a . . . rebellious act against the authority of the British. (Morrison interview, 2024)

Modern-day Sinn Féin sees itself as inheriting this strategy against British colonial rule (Maillot, 2005: 7–23; English, 2012: 107, 250–252, 299). Their manifesto in 1983 stated: 'We see no point in attending Westminster. The London government asserts, by force of British arms, that the sovereignty of Ireland lies within the Westminster parliament. Sinn Féin asserts . . . the sovereignty of Ireland rests with the Irish people'. For this reason, they justified the IRA's '[right] to resist British occupation' (Sinn Féin, 1983). The IRA's campaign has ended, but Republicans' refusal to accept Britain's right to rule remains. The northern conflict ended in a stalemate. Republicans were not defeated (for examples of this view, see Leahy, 2020, 2025; Ó Dochartaigh, 2021). Sinn Féin could maintain its principle to end British rule and their protest against it via abstention (Foster, 2019). Speaking outside of Downing Street in 2017, Adams reaffirmed that Sinn Féin would not take seats in Westminster:

> We won't take an oath of allegiance to the English Queen, no harm to her . . . We are united Irelanders. We want to govern ourselves . . . We want you out of our affairs. (Adams, 2017)

Anti-colonialism alongside anti-monarchism were on display. Féilim Ó hAdhmaill, a former Republican prisoner, also commented that having to swear 'allegiance to the king or queen' was an important factor influencing abstention (Ó hAdhmaill interview, 2024). Morrison agreed (Morrison, 2017). But he adds that abstention from Westminster is not primarily motivated by anti-monarchism:

> even . . . if Britain was a republic I would still not take my seat . . . Once I took my seat . . . I have already conceded Britain's right to govern on this shore – a claim that was demonstrably rejected in December 1918. (Morrison, 2017)

Adams concurs:

> following the 1918 election . . . Sinn Féin MPs abstained from Westminster . . . This was not just about . . . an oath of allegiance to an English Queen . . . the key issue was and is one of sovereignty. To take seats in Westminster requires that a successful Irish republican MP accepts that the British state has the right to sovereignty over Ireland or a part of the island. (An Phoblacht, 2019)

Michelle Gildernew, former Sinn Féin MP elected to the Fermanagh-South Tyrone constituency (2001–2015, 2017–2024), offers a similar explanation: 'We do not think British influences should have any role in our [Irish] constitutional future . . . we do not take our seats in Westminster because that is the British parliament' (Gildernew interview, 2025). For Gibney: 'we are a separatist party . . . only interested in institutions on the island of Ireland' (Gibney interview, 2025). The essence of Sinn Féin's abstentionism to Westminster is long-term defiance against British rule over any part of Irish affairs (see also Maskey, 2018).

The other long-term factor is electoral support for abstention from Westminster before 1998. McKearney notes the 'majority' that Sinn Féin achieved by abstaining in 1918 (McKearney interview, 2024). Their electoral success contributed to Britain eventually

granting dominion status to what later became the Republic of Ireland. In contrast, Morrison believes:

> famous Irish politicians who did take their . . . seats in Westminster failed abysmally . . . Charles Stewart Parnell and his Irish Parliamentary Party, after decades in Westminster, and his successor, John Redmond, failed to achieve Home Rule. (Morrison interview, 2024)

He is referring to Irish constitutional nationalist leaders before 1914 who sought at least devolution within the United Kingdom for the entire island; it did not happen before World War I for multiple reasons. Sinn Féin's abstentionism achieved greater movement towards southern Irish independence (Feeney, 2002: 70, 85, 144–145). Modern Sinn Féin also won some Westminster seats in the north via abstention before 1998. As Morrison recounted:

> Adams got elected . . . Thereafter . . . McGuinness [in 1997] . . . abstentionism was not an obstacle to the electorate voting for a Sinn Féin MP. That goes back into the historical space with the nationalist community . . . defying [British] authority. (Morrison interview, 2024)

Westminster electoral dominance for the party over their nationalist rivals the SDLP only emerged from 2001. Nevertheless, there were certainly electoral victories in some constituencies before 1998. And Sinn Féin's increase in seats by 2001 against the SDLP happened despite abstentionism. Those results show it was potentially in part the conflict and the IRA's campaign rather than abstention that prevented them from overtaking the SDLP before 2001 (Leahy, 2020: 212–215).

Short-term factors

More recent factors also explain why Sinn Féin keep abstaining from Westminster. Perhaps the most important is the British Government already conceding the principle of Irish self-determination (O'Donnell, 2007: 106–117). In 1993, the British and Irish governments agreed the Downing Street Declaration. While not reversing undemocratic partition as Sinn Féin wanted by allowing one entire island-wide vote, the British formally accepted that the people of the island, separately but concurrently in the north and the south, would decide reunification. Britain and Westminster would not (CAIN, 1993; Cullen, 2024: 221–222, 306; Leahy, 2025: 11–15). Hence Adams said: 'for the . . . [1993] Declaration to address . . . Irish national self-determination was . . . significant' (Adams, 2003: 215). The Good Friday Agreement reaffirmed that self-determination was permitted in future without British interference. Abstentionism can continue because the island of Ireland's right to self-determination has already been secured. It does not require taking seats in Westminster.

Sinn Féin recognise the Irish right to self-determination is a significant difference from their Basque allies, who have not secured the same right (Cullen, 2024: 213–255; Powell, 2015: 131). Sinn Féin repeatedly call for Basques to be given this right. In October 1998, during a visit to the Basque Country, Adams said a conflict there existed because of 'the denial of the Basque people's right to self-determination' (An Phoblacht, 1998b). Interestingly, more recently, Sinn Féin's Declan Kearney praised EH Bildu and Catalan nationalists for facilitating in the Spanish parliament a left-wing government to form in 2019 between PSOE (the Spanish centre-left) and Podemos (the self-styled radical

Spanish left), and for supporting the PSOE–Podemos budget. In return, Kearney suggested the PSOE–Podemos coalition 'should break decisively the Francoist legacy . . . bringing forward . . . self-determination for the people of Catalunya and the Basque Country' (An Phoblacht, 2021). Ó hAdhmaill agrees that without the right to self-determination, for EH Bildu:

> it is much more difficult . . . they have to change the constitution of Spain . . . You are not allowed to have parts of the Spanish state breaking away. (Ó hAdhmaill interview, 2024)

Basque participation in the Cortes is accepted by Republicans as a way for EH Bildu to try to get the Spanish to grant greater movement towards Basque self-determination.

The continued electoral success of Sinn Féin's abstentionist policy towards Westminster means there is no imperative to change tactics. Since 2001, the party has continually outperformed the SDLP. At the Westminster election in 2024, Sinn Féin even overtook the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) becoming Northern Ireland's leading party. Surveys from LucidTalk (one of Northern Ireland's premier polling companies) have consistently found that Sinn Féin voters support abstention. In 2017, only 1.6% of Sinn Féin supporters said the party should take seats in Westminster. While those against abstention increased to 20.6 percent in 2020, 75.9% still favoured abstention (Belfast Telegraph, 2020). Recent election results in 2024 show that abstentionism is not dissuading northern Nationalists from predominantly voting for Sinn Féin. That is despite the SDLP repeatedly arguing that Republicans waste people's votes via abstention (SDLP, 2015: 3, 17, 2019: 1–3, 25). As Gildernew argues: 'We've consistently outperformed [the SDLP] for years, so we don't see . . . [abstentionism] changing' (Gildernew interview, 2025).

Republicans question what can practically be achieved in Westminster. Northern Ireland has 18 out of 650 MPs. For Morrison, Sinn Féin representatives 'meet [British] ministers without going into that parliament . . . being subsumed by hundreds of Tory and Labour MPs who . . . do not give a damn about here' (Morrison interview, 2024). Powell records Sinn Féin leaders having multiple meetings with British Prime Ministers and Ministers after 1997 (despite their abstentionism from the House of Commons) (Powell, 2008: 90–308, 2015: 104). McKearney suggests: 'Even if [Sinn Féin] won the entire eighteen seats . . . they won't have much influence, unless of course the unusual event of a hung parliament' (McKearney interview, 2024). The caveat is that the DUP had a confidence and supply agreement with May's Conservative minority government between 2017 and 2019, vetoing Brexit deals they disliked. However, normal service resumed with minimal influence for Northern Irish MPs in Westminster following Johnson's Conservatives winning a majority in 2019 and Starmer's Labour landslide in 2024. Ó hAdhmaill remarked:

> they can still go to Westminster and meet politicians . . . They are the First Minister [Michelle O'Neill in the northern Assembly] . . . that gives them power, more so than the MPs would have. They have only got 7 MPs out of 600 plus. (Ó hAdhmaill interview, 2024)

Their influence in Stormont alongside MPs from Northern Ireland accounting for few seats in Westminster helps account for why abstention to Westminster persists.

Sinn Féin says recent events demonstrate that participating in Westminster is futile. An interesting situation arose during the minority British Conservative administration under May, backed by the DUP, when sections of the British media who opposed Brexit wanted

Sinn Féin to take their seats (see, for example, Toynbee, 2018). However, if the Conservatives and DUP had supported May's Brexit deal, their opponents lacked the numbers to block it even if Sinn Féin took their seats. The majority needed would have increased if they had participated, as their seats are currently discounted from parliamentary votes due to their abstention. Gildernew recalls:

> people . . . in London [were] saying . . . would you not go in and save us from Brexit . . . we were going no because there is only seven of us. We can't stop Brexit. (Gildernew interview, 2025)

Sinn Féin suggested that Brexit demonstrates the British Government ignores Irish people. Paul Maskey, Sinn Fein's west Belfast MP, argues:

> Numerically, culturally and politically, the people of Ireland are inconsequential to Britain . . . The Irish people now see a parliament that runs roughshod over . . . their democratically expressed decision by enforcing Brexit upon them. (Maskey, 2018)

He is referring here to the north of Ireland having voted 'remain' in the Brexit referendum in 2016, but the British Government at first tried to ensure that it left the European Union on the same terms as England, Scotland and Wales. Sinn Féin supported remain.

Before the United Kingdom's election in 2019, Sinn Féin used the example of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP), who won 56 seats in 2015's Westminster election and 35 seats in 2017. The SNP favour Scottish independence and were against Brexit. Scotland voted remain in 2016. In 2019, Sinn Féin's manifesto commented:

> The numbers game [in Westminster] is rigged. Scotland and the north of Ireland are small fry in. . .Westminster . . . For instance, despite 59 Scottish MPs taking their seats in Westminster [and Scotland voting remain in 2016] their voice is ignored . . . The outcome of the DUP's alliance with the Tories needs no rehearsal here. (Sinn Féin, 2019: 8)

Scottish MPs could not stop Scotland from Brexit. The DUP rejected the Conservatives' Brexit deal in 2019 but were sidelined by the Conservatives thereafter in any case. Gildernew recalls:

> SNP MPs . . . couldn't get [Brexit] stopped . . . Scotland, Wales and the north of Ireland are always going to be in a minority because the numbers in England are. . .massive. We were never going to really make a big impact in Westminster . . . we could make as big an impact by not taking our seats. (Gildernew interview 2025)

Sinn Féin uses these Brexit examples to further justify abstention. They argue that there are too few MPs from the north of Ireland, Scotland and Wales compared to the English Conservatives and Labour to have a significant impact. Instead, Sinn Féin could focus on negotiations with the British and Irish governments, the EU and the United States during Brexit because they were a leading party in the north of Ireland (Sinn Féin, 2019: 8). In 2019, the current Sinn Féin President Mary Lou McDonald refuted suggestions that they should take seats in Westminster: 'There is a strong majority of MPs in Westminster in favour of Brexit and seven MPs – be they Sinn Féin [or otherwise] . . . – will not "stop Brexit"'. McDonald believed 'rather than . . . embroiling Ireland in the Westminster pantomime, our efforts are best spent building common cause and international pressure on

the British government to' accept Northern Ireland's special status within the EU (Lou McDonald, 2019). Evershed and Murphy suggest Sinn Féin's idea post-2016 for the EU to grant special status to Northern Ireland aligned with Irish Government policy towards Brexit (Evershed and Murphy, 2022). Focusing their attention on allies in the EU did produce results. Northern Ireland has a different relationship with the EU today than England, Scotland and Wales.

The first-past-the-post voting system used for UK general elections means that coalitions are rare. Conservative or Labour majorities have been the norm in elections since 1945, with a few exceptions. In contrast, McKearney notes the different situation that Spain's more proportional voting system has produced: 'In Spain there are Basque nationalists and Catalonian nationalists which can influence the socialist government in Madrid' (McKearney interview, 2024); and these nationalists can influence Spanish governments led by the Partido Popular as well. The demise of single-party Spanish governments in recent years alongside the Cortes being elected via proportional representation means separatists can influence Madrid politics (Gray, 2017, 2024). McKearney understands why left Basque nationalists cooperate with Spanish socialists:

> to keep out the Francoists and the far right . . . Comparatively the socialist government in Madrid would have some respect for Basques and the Catalonians. (McKearney interview, 2024)

In May 2023, Declan Kearney made a similar observation:

> The PSOE led coalition has been good for politics in the Spanish state . . . Whilst the shadow of Franco's regime continues to contaminate political institutions . . . this coalition government, with the parliamentary support of Basque and Catalan MPs, has led the way in helping to implement new political strategies and social democratic. . .policies. (An Phoblacht, 2023)

Irish Republicans within and outside of Sinn Féin understand that memories of the Spanish Civil War, with its oppression of Basques and the left in Spain makes it logical for Basques to support left-wing Spanish governments. There is no similar formative event in UK history persuading Sinn Féin to work with Labour in Westminster. Adams suggests that UK history means that '[m]any republicans and nationalists' do not 'expect a lot of difference under a Labour government' in Westminster because Labour are 'British unionists' (Adams, 2003: 351).

In summary, Sinn Féin maintains its abstention from the British House of Commons because of a long-term principle. But they also have pragmatic contemporary reasons for sustaining abstentionism. In the words of Gibney, these reasons indicate that 'Sinn Féin will not be setting foot in Westminster in terms of its elected representatives taking their seats' (Gibney interview, 2025).

The Basque Nationalist Left

The position of the Basque Nationalist Left towards institutional politics at state and regional levels has not been consistent over the decades and has evolved in response to both internal circumstances within the movement, broader political and societal changes. This section outlines the historical trajectory and rationale of their engagement or lack

thereof with institutional politics in Madrid. Due to the Congress of Deputies' centrality over the Senate in Spain's legislative system, we focus exclusively on the Congress. Each subsection corresponds to a major shift in the strategy throughout the period spanning from the return to a democratic regime after Franco's dictatorship until 2025.

Late 1970s–1999: Active abstention in parliament

While the Basque Nationalist Left movement contested all the elections for Spain's Cortes Generales following the end of the dictatorship in the mid-1970s, their actual involvement in institutional life in this period was null or scarce (Cullen, 2024: 177, 196, 204; Irvin, 1999: 120–121, 175, 196; Whitfield, 2014: 65). The debate about taking part in such institutions was marked with 'tension and even passion' (HB, 1999: 96), particularly during the early years following the founding of the left-wing Basque coalition Herri Batasuna (HB) in 1978, with some of the coalition parties advocating for normalised participation while others opposed it. While there was never an issue about participation at the municipal level, the question of whether to participate in state and devolved regional institutions in Navarre and the Basque region –and if so, how – was an 'endemic debate throughout HB's history' (HB, 1999: 96), one that resulted in a fluctuating stance towards institutional politics. In a strategy that would shape their position for the next two decades, HB decided to contest the first regular democratic general elections under the new 1978 Constitution, with the condition that their elected members would not participate in parliament. The following extract captures the rationale behind this position:

> With this decision, fiercely debated by the party at the time and subsequently revised again and again, the tactic of the nationalist left was established, a tactic which has always annoyed the powers-that-be and their cronies. This approach aimed to fight the system from within, always attempting to strike a delicate balance between participating in institutions and, at the same time, delegitimising the [Regime's] Reform. (HB, 1999: 77)

As one of our interviewees notes, this position must be understood within the broader context of a strategy for negotiating with the state: 'there is an engagement, a presence in the institutional framework . . . but not in Madrid because Madrid is not going to provide any response at any time . . . we're never going to be the majority in Madrid; we are only 3 million people' (interviewee 1, 2025). This disinterest in state-level institutions is reflected in the inclusion of non-professional politicians on electoral lists, including, for example, relatives of victims of GAL, the Spanish state-sponsored death squads active in the 1980s against ETA (Whitfield, 2014: 60).

Common arguments against participating in institutions included the belief that the emerging democratic regime lacked legitimacy because of its ties to Francoist structures, a rejection of the state's repression of Basque people, and an opposition to statutes of autonomy and the Spanish Constitution, which did not recognise the right to self-determination and had not been endorsed in the Basque region (Cullen, 2024: 165–167; Irvin, 1999: 107–122; Whitfield, 2014: 25, 32, 45–50). It is important to note that, unlike in Northern Ireland, an anti-colonial discourse has not been prominent in the Basque context (Irvin, 1999: 69). As Keating (2001: 206) notes in his comparison of the Northern Ireland and Basque cases, the rationale for anti-colonial sentiment 'is much less relevant in the Basque Country, which has never been a colony in any sense'.

The following transcripted excerpt chronicle of a HB press conference after the Spanish general elections in 1979 captures the context for their abstentionism in parliamentary life:

> We will not go to Madrid because we are not Spanish, we are the quintessence of nationalism and class struggle . . . we will go to Madrid only when absolutely necessary, to ensure our seats are not taken from us, but we will not participate in the Cortes. (ABC, 7 March 1979)

Here we find a difference with Sinn Féin. While HB did not intend to participate in the Spanish parliament, its elected members attempted, often without success, to take their seats in the legislature. To acquire full status as a Member of Parliament, abiding by the Constitution is required. HB deputies refused to use the official oath, opting instead for an alternative formula, 'by legal imperative, I do promise', to proceed with the procedural formality. However, this formula was not accepted, and they were denied their positions as MPs in successive parliamentary terms.

A stark example of the tensions of these years occurred at the start of the legislative session in 1989, at the end of a decade marked by a tense climate of violence due to the intense armed campaign by ETA and state-sponsored extrajudicial actions. On the eve of the inaugural session of the parliamentary term, a far-right group carried out a fatal attack on elected HB deputies and senators at a Madrid restaurant, killing one deputy and seriously injuring another. A few days later, elected members from HB, including those who were unhurt in the attack, were expelled from the constituent session of parliament for not using the required oath formula (El País, 1989).

The dispute over the oath ended in 1990 when the Constitutional Court ruled that HB's alternative formula was valid. While elected HB representatives took their seats in that and the following term, they rarely participated in parliamentary life. They were involved in only three sessions: to denounce the Gulf War and NATO's interference against the sovereignty of nations in 1990; during the debate and vote on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992; and in a parliamentary address in 1995 to criticise the Francoist state structures, the socialist government's corruption and state repression against Basque militants (Idigoras, 1995). An additional institutional engagement involved the symbolic meeting of HB's leader Jon Idigoras with the Spanish King Juan Carlos in Zarzuela Palace as part of the round of hearings of all parties prior to the formation of the government after the 1993 elections. Despite HB's uncompromising anti-monarchy stance, Idigoras used this meeting with the King to convey the need to open channels of dialogue to solve the Basque conflict (Idigoras, 2000).

This pattern of HB representatives taking their seats in parliament (or attempting to do so) but otherwise having limited engagement changed in the 1996 elections, in which HB presented candidates on the basis that they would abstain from taking their seats.

Unlike Sinn Féin's approach to Westminster, where taking seats was seen as an abdication of their principles and a breach of ideological consistency, HB's dynamic strategy was driven by a sense of political opportunity within an overall rejection of Spanish parliament. In other words, for the party, their occasional, and often unconventional, involvement in Madrid was not a validation of the legitimacy of Spain's democratic regime. HB's infrequent participation in state-level institutions should be viewed as a means of accessing a platform to voice protests and disseminate ideas, often through heated speeches and radical discourses, whenever it served their objectives. A significant example occurred in the electoral campaign of the 1996 general elections when HB incorporated part of ETA's

proposal for a peace process into their broadcast, which was intended to be aired in the television and radio slots allocated to parties contesting the election. As a result, the entire National Executive of HB was imprisoned, though they were later absolved (Whitfield, 2014: 86–87).

From an electoral perspective, there is no clear correlation between full or partial abstention strategies and levels of electoral support. In the six Spanish general elections held between 1979 and 1996, HB secured between two and four seats in Congress. HB's support experienced a gradual but steady decline after its peak electoral success in 1986. This drop coincided with their sporadic parliamentary appearances in the early 1990s and the strategic shift in 1996, when they abstained from taking their seats. A final relevant point, making the situation distinct from Sinn Féin, is HB's understanding and collaboration with other radical left and pro-independence forces in Spain. This alliance allowed HB to gain a small but key amount of electoral support from outside the Basque region and Navarre in the 1980s (Cullen, 2024: 196).

2000s: Electoral abstentionism and bans

The late 1990s gave rise to a change of tactics in HB's engagement with institutional politics at the nation-state level. In a decision largely supported by party members, HB opted to not present any candidates for the 2000 Spanish election, urging voters to actively abstain from voting. This new strategy was adopted right before the end of the 18-month ETA ceasefire that followed the 1998 Lizarra-Garazi Peace Agreement – the latter being where HB, the PNV and other Basque organisations agreed to attempt a peaceful resolution to the conflict and sought the right to self-determination for Basques (Cullen, 2024: 240–243; Whitfield, 2014: 89). Though HB had always shown disaffection with the Cortes, this decision meant a move away from HB's traditional position of contesting every election.

HB's call for abstention argued that the general election 'is not ours' (Basañez, 1999) and advocated for joining forces around the construction of a sovereign democracy for the Basque Country. In the words of HB's National Executive member Karmelo Landa, abstaining from the Spanish election 'will take away the legitimacy of Spanish intrusiveness in the Basque process' (Isasi, 1999). The new strategy incorporated the creation of Udalbiltza, a union of councils across the region established in September 1999, which was the first institution that could be considered as a component of a Basque nation-state (Cullen, 2024: 244; Whitfield, 2014: 95). In this sense, Arnaldo Otegi clarified that the call for a boycott of the national elections was 'not about an anti-institution debate' but 'a debate in favour of institutions, in favour of the institutional architecture that Basque democracy needs' (Vigor, 1999).

During ETA's truce, rumours emerged suggesting that state apparatuses had considered making HB illegal (HB, 1999: 359). With that in mind, the Basque Nationalist Left created and led the electoral coalition Euskal Herritarrok (EH). A less inflamed political context and a certain optimism during ETA's ceasefire contributed to the electoral growth of the new nationalist left banner. For example, in the 1998 Basque parliamentary elections and 1999 Spanish municipal elections and parliamentary elections in Navarre, EH surpassed HB's best historical results (Whitfield, 2014: 92). Despite these successes, EH followed HB's abstentionist strategy for the Spanish elections in 2000.

In their campaign materials for that election, EH provided a list of 12 core principles supporting their call for an 'active' abstention including peace, freedom and

self-determination. EH's campaign leaflets included a reference to the shift in tactics in Spanish elections:

> The nationalist left has always been very critical of these [general] elections, and it should be remembered that in the last elections we presented a candidacy made up of political prisoners and that we refused from the outset to take our parliamentary seats . . . Precisely when we are demanding the right to speak and decide for the Basque Country, elections are being called to elect the Spanish institutions that will represent the mandate and take decisions that, in the name of Spain, will affect our future. Consequently, the most coherent attitude and the one we propose to Basque society as a whole is that of abstention.

EH framed the election in binary terms, positioning themselves as supporters of Basque institutions, while portraying the participating parties, including the Basque Nationalist PNV, as supporters of Spanish institutions. As EH's spokesperson Pernando Barrena stated: 'Basques have only two options: dependence on the interests of Madrid and Paris or to build Basque democracy to own our future' (Azpilikueta, 2000).

Two key considerations are relevant here: first, these elections were the first to take place after the collapse of ETA's truce in 1999; second, since the late 1980s the electoral results of the nationalist left had been steadily undermined by ETA's activities (Whitfield, 2014: 120, 197, 205). Although it is unclear how ETA's resumption of its operations would have influenced electoral support in the 2000 general election, the negative poll predictions for EH in that election, driven by ETA's return to the armed campaign, were confirmed in the 2001 Basque parliamentary elections, where EH's support was halved – the worst result in the history of the movement. Although not openly acknowledged by EH during the campaign, the lack of electoral prospects likely contributed to their strategic decision not to contest the 2000 Spanish elections.

The following years, up to 2011, were turbulent ones for the Basque Nationalist Left. HB was refounded as Batasuna in 2001. Then in 2002, the Law on Political Parties was passed, allowing the Spanish Government to dissolve parties and electoral groupings with connections to illegal armed groups. Batasuna was declared illegal and listed by the EU 'as a terrorist organisation' due to its alleged links with ETA (Bourne, 2015; Whitfield, 2014: 99–104, 121). Subsequent parties and groups formed in an effort to circumvent the ban were also prohibited from participating in most elections. In sum, both ETA's continued armed activity and the Spanish state's response to it set the Basque case apart from the situation in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement (Cullen, 2024: 248–293; Powell, 2015: 122, 255).

In another strategic shift in 2004, following the banning of Batasuna, the nationalist left sought to participate in the general elections, this time proposing a joint candidacy with other Basque nationalist parties, with the right to self-determination as the only point on the agenda. Despite this strategy contradicting the abstentionist stance from 2000, the exceptional political circumstances created by the judicial ban on Batasuna outweighed the foundational principles invoked in 2000 to reject the legitimacy of Spanish elections and those who contested them. In Otegi's words, this new position aimed to leave aside partisan interests 'to turn a Spanish election into a Basque election and to form a national representation' (Inziarte, 2004). However, the demands from the other parties for a condemnation of ETA's activities – something the nationalist left has consistently refused to do – prevented the unified candidacy from moving forward. Due to the suspension of its activities, Batasuna decided to call on voters to submit blank ballot papers (Superti, 2020).

For the following general elections, in 2008, a new list of candidates was presented under the name of the historic nationalist left Acción Nacionalista Vasca–Eusko Abertzale Ekintza to try to circumvent the law on political parties. They called for 'a resounding no to assimilation and repression, and a resounding yes to political change and independence', and conceded that their participation in the Madrid elections was one of political opportunity 'to use the loudspeaker provided by Congress and the Senate to socialise our political approach and influence public opinion in Spanish state' (Jauregi, 2008), resembling HB's strategic use of Madrid parliament in the early 1990s. However, the list of candidates was banned, and so the nationalist left initially called for voters to submit invalid ballot papers as in 2004, but then later called for active voter abstention from the elections. Prominent members of the nationalist left recognised some levels of inconsistency in these calls. Iñaki Olalde, acknowledged 'first reactions of astonishment' among militants and sympathisers (Iriondo, 2008). Compared to the results of the 1996 general election, the increase in null ballots in 2004 and the higher abstention rate in 2008 suggest a decline in electoral backing. Yet, the movement still maintained a considerable base of loyal supporters (Superti, 2020; Whitfield, 2014: 10, 15).

2011–2025: Legalisation, normalisation and full participation

Much like Sinn Féin with Westminster, the Basque Nationalist Left had frequently questioned the value of participating in the Cortes. Two editorials in the Basque left-wing daily newspaper *Gara*, published ahead of the 2004 and 2008 general elections – 'Invisible and sterile presence in the Cortes' (20 January 2004) and 'To be useful for Madrid or to serve the Basque Country' (14 January 2008) – questioned the ability of the relatively small number of Basque MPs to influence parliamentary affairs and advance Basque national interests (with only 23 MPs in the Basque region and Navarre of the total 350 MPs). The first editorial stated:

> The possibilities for a Basque party to 'do politics' in the Spanish Cortes, within the constraints of parliamentary formalism, are always limited and dependent on the needs of the major state-level parties. Little can be gained from this for the Basque Country. (*Gara*, 2004)

However, this debate was discontinued in the following decade. ETA's unilateral and definitive cessation of its armed activity in 2011 paved the way for the gradual normalisation of democratic and political life. This development involved the legalisation of a new banner, Sortu, and the nationalist left's commitment to fully participate in all elections and institutions, marking a departure from their foundational stance that the Spanish Cortes was illegitimate and leading to them embracing a pragmatic political strategy. From 2011, Sortu participated in general elections as part of sovereigntist left coalitions (Amaiur and now EH Bildu), which included other smaller nationalist left-wing parties that explicitly condemned ETA's violence (Whitfield, 2014: 215, 235–241, 270, 278–282). Despite Amaiur's historic results in the 2011 elections (Whitfield, 2014: 241), its ability to influence parliament was limited due to the conservative absolute majority.

Over the years, the nationalist left has made a determined effort to break from past radical and uncompromising political positions, aiming instead to establish a reputation as a legitimate, responsible and reliable partner in governance. In the Cortes, EH Bildu supported the socialist party's motion of censure in 2018 against conservative President Mariano Rajoy due to the continuous corruption scandals within the Partido Popular. EH

Bildu's spokesperson noted, however, that their vote was not proof of support for the socialist party but that they were voting 'in favour out of democratic hygiene', emphasising that both conservatives and socialists 'are part of the same regime that is based on imposition and denial' (Naiz, 2018).

At that moment, a new political cycle emerged, one in which successive left-wing governments – a minority government from 2018 to 2020, followed by coalition governments in 2020–2023 and from 2023 onward – have needed external support from regional nationalist and pro-independence parties and other smaller groups in a fragmented parliament. Given the tight numbers for a progressive-leaning alliance, EH Bildu did not miss this window of opportunity to make political gains, inside and outside parliament, and progressively became a central actor in parliamentary life. Notwithstanding the socialist party's lack of commitment when it comes to addressing historical and foundational claims supported by the Basque Nationalist Left, such as holding a referendum on self-determination, the withdrawal of Spanish police and military forces from the Basque Country and the release of Basque prisoners, EH Bildu facilitated and voted for Pedro Sánchez's investitures as President on three occasions and supported the left-wing coalition government in key votes such as the state budget. One of our interviewees puts it bluntly when describing this new strategy:

> This scenario has given enormous centrality to the activity of the nationalist left in Madrid. There is more talk about their work in Madrid than about their work in the [regional] parliaments in Gasteiz or Navarre. It's been a brutal swing of the pendulum. (Interviewee 3, 2025)

Currently, EH Bildu's strategy consists of emphasising its left-wing identity through progressive social policies at the expense of its pro-independence position. After the 2023 general elections, Otegi expressed a conciliatory commitment to building an alternative in Spain to prevent a government leaning towards the far right and to work 'towards sovereignty, progressivism, and the left' (Gómez Sánchez, 2023). This de-emphasising of the nationalist agenda coincides with a period of important sociological change and may, therefore, be partly attributed to countering the strong emergence of political forces to the left of the socialist party in Spain during the mid-2010s, which are competing ideologically with EH Bildu.

EH Bildu's pragmatic approach in parliament mirrors that of nationalist and pro-independence parties in Catalonia and Galicia, particularly Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, with which they share a close relationship. Perhaps more significantly, EH Bildu's new strategy based on public policy and governance challenges the managerial role traditionally assigned to the PNV. This strategy is probably unsurprising, considering the intense competition between EH Bildu and PNV for political hegemony in Basque regional politics, a battle which is played out in Madrid (Gray, 2017, 2024). From an electoral point of view, the nationalist left's mainstreaming process, including its shift towards more conventional politics, is paying off. Their support remains at historic levels, even if backing for Basque independence is at one of its lowest points (Lardiés, 2025; Sociómetro Vasco, 2025). Some tensions can be identified within certain grassroots sectors of the political movement, as illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

> In this new strategy, where institutional politics is playing an increasingly important role, street-level participation is declining. The disappearance of ETA has reduced social tension, leading us into a phase of significant social demobilisation. Institutions carry more weight now, but you're

> no longer present in the streets. That brings major problems, and it definitely sparks serious debates. It is in that framework that participation in Madrid fits in. (Interviewee 3, 2025)

However, this shift has not yet resulted in the emergence of a serious rival political group within that ideological spectrum.

Conclusion

A series of historical and contemporary reasons account for why Sinn Féin has sustained their abstentionism from the UK parliament in Westminster, while EH Bildu have abandoned their movement's previous abstentionist strategies in respect to the Spanish Cortes. Long-term differences between the two cases include that Irish Republicans have abstained since 1918 because they view British rule as colonial, while Basque left-wing nationalists do not have the same history of abstentionism to draw on. Sinn Féin's continuing abstentionism has led to electoral successes too, whereas abstention was not consistently successful for HB. The combination of a first-past-the-post voting system and Northern Ireland having only 18 MPs means that these MPs generally matter little numerically in Westminster. In Spain, on the other hand, the demise of single-party government, together with the proportional voting system means Basque nationalists have some influence (although minor as Basque representation in the Cortes is numerically small) on governing left-wing Spanish parties, with whom they share some socio-economic priorities. The memory of the Spanish Civil War is important in enabling EH Bildu to justify working with the Spanish left. Sinn Féin and Irish nationalists have already obtained the right to Irish self-determination from the British Government too. They do not need to sit in Westminster to achieve it. Left Basque nationalists did not obtain the same right via their previous policy of abstention.

This study offers broader reflections for future research on abstentionism in the Basque and Irish contexts and beyond. First, it shows that a combination of long-term historical principles alongside short-term pragmatic political considerations can see abstentionism maintained or ended by separatist parties. Second, public opinion matters. In Northern Ireland, most Irish nationalists are not against abstentionism. In the Basque Country, the mixed results when HB advocated abstentionism suggests the latter is not a particularly successful tactic there. Third, whether separatists have achieved the right to self-determination or not can influence whether they take their seats in the nation-state's parliament, whose authority they ultimately contest. Fourth, electoral patterns and systems can sway decisions on abstentionism. In Spain, a proportional voting system alongside the decline of the two main parties on the centre-right and centre-left has made nationalist groups such as EH Bildu influential in the Cortes. With only 18 Northern Irish MPs and a first-past-the-post majoritarian voting system for Westminster, Sinn Féin's influence would generally be minor if they took up their seats. Fifth, an interesting consideration is whether Sinn Féin would participate in Westminster *if* the SDLP re-emerged as the dominant northern nationalist party. We suspect probably not. Sinn Féin did not do so before 1998 when the SDLP outperformed them. And since the Irish right to self-determination has been secured, there is little incentive for them to participate. In contrast, despite sitting in Madrid and supporting left-wing governments, EH Bildu (and other nationalist parties) are yet to achieve the right to self-determination. Perhaps a more pertinent question is what *do* nationalist parties such as EH Bildu or the SDLP gain towards achieving their ultimate objectives from participating in the nation-state's parliament?

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