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Measuring Political Brand Equity in Ireland

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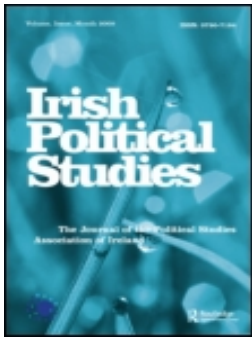
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Measuring Political Brand Equity in Ireland

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ABSTRACT *This article will apply cognitive mapping techniques to understand the manner in which political brand equity is formed, and how it differs, across the four largest Irish political parties, from the perspective of citizens. It assesses the fundamental aspects of branding and brand equity in the marketing and political marketing literatures. Primary data were generated in spring 2012 through the participation of 232 citizens in the political brand elicitation stage and a further 75 citizens were involved in creating cognitive maps of brand equity. From the mapping process, we see that Irish political party brands are plagued by a number of negative associations. Fianna Fáil's brand is overshadowed by past mistakes and former leaders with bad reputations; while the Fine Gael brand is wracked by low levels of engagement. This article constitutes the first attempt to measure the political brand equity of Irish political parties.*

Keywords: political; brand; equity; parties

Introduction

This article is concerned with understanding the political brand equity of the four largest Irish political parties, Fine Gael, the Labour Party, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, from the perspective of the consumers of political products – citizens. The project views political brands as cognitive structures created through a process of learning (French & Smith, 2010). However, this is not an insignificant task, which may account for the absence of such an inquiry until now. This study draws from research by French and Smith (2010) that attempted to provide a method of measuring political brand equity from a consumer perspective in the UK. As such, this study is grounded in applying marketing concepts in a political context.

The unique attributes of the Irish political landscape: the absence of a conventional class cleavage party system (Weeks, 2010)¹ in contrast to that found in the UK; or a

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politics founded on conflicts between church and state, urban and rural, or centre and periphery (Lipset & Rokkan, 1990); and the general dearth of research on the concept of political brand equity, all provide reasons for conducting this research. The article will explore the cognitive structures placed around the parties by the selected sample of citizens. Specifically, we seek to identify the strength, favourability and uniqueness of brand associations that Keller (1993) regards as the building blocks of brand equity. The findings will highlight how political brand equity, from the perspective of 'political consumers', varies across the major Irish parties.

The article initially discusses the literature on political marketing. It then looks at political branding and brand equity. The article then sets out its methodology, before examining the aggregate brand concept maps and assessing the centrality of the brand associations. The conclusion highlights the findings, significance and limitations of the article.

Political Marketing

The term political marketing was used in the same manner as propaganda when it first appeared in the mid-twentieth century (Scammell, 1999). Political marketing emerged as a field of research in the 1960s (Scammell, 1999), most notably when Kotler and Levy (1969) proposed that marketing, as a discipline, should be broadened to encompass non-profit organisations. During the 1990s, the literature came to focus on adapting marketing techniques for political communication (Butler & Collins, 1994; Newman, 1994; Wring, 1997). The new millennium signalled the wider application of marketing theory to politics. Areas such as brand equity (French & Smith, 2010; Phipps *et al.*, 2010) and e-marketing (Jackson, 2003) are examples of the move towards expanding beyond a focus on communication.

Political marketing assumes that democracies can be viewed in the context of a market (Butler & Collins, 1994; Wring, 1997). The citizen possesses a vote which he/she gives to a candidate in exchange for assurances that the candidate will act in accordance with the citizen's interests (Wring, 1997). However, viewing democracy as a series of transactions between voter and candidate implies a degree of alienation from the political process, reducing democracy to the act of voting. Nevertheless, some scholars (Harris & Lock, 2001; O'Cass, 2001; Ormrod, 2005) suggest that political marketing can improve the democratic process by helping parties communicate with, and respond to, their supporters more effectively (Lees-Marshment, 2009) – thus addressing reservations about commodification of the democratic process and fetishising voting to the exclusion of other forms of participation.

O'Shaughnessy (2001: 1048), borrowing from Gronroos (1990), goes beyond the limitations of political communication to offer a definition of political marketing:

as seeking to establish, maintain and enhance long-term voter relationships at a profit for society and political parties, so that the objectives of the individual political actors and organisations involved are met. The political 'product' is

some amalgam of policy, leader image, inherited memory, promise, and it is also a referendum on past performance.

Despite the early criticisms of being ‘shallow science’ (Philo, 1993) and a *post hoc* approach for explaining away success or failure (Bowler & Farrell, 1992); and the fact that political marketing is a relatively new discipline, it has started to define itself as a distinct and separate area of study outside of political science and marketing. The adaptation of marketing theory to a political context has allowed academics and policy-makers to view political parties not just as staid organisations vying for power, but as brands; cognitive structures residing in the minds of every citizen, structures in a state of constant flux. Like any brand, political brands require constant management to ensure congruence with the image the party wishes to project.

Branding, Political Branding and Brand Equity

Kotler *et al.* (2005: 549) define a brand as ‘a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors’. Kim (1990: 65) argues that brands have no tangible properties, and it ‘is a mental translation, an abstraction of that object or service. It exists solely as a ‘mental construct,’ a ‘typification,’ an ‘idea’ in the minds of those who behold it’. This definition holds particular relevance when examining the concept of the brand outside of the traditional marketing framework. A brand is a form of physical stimulus harnessed by sellers to denote ownership, offer a means of differentiating products and provide a guarantee of quality.

According to Keller (1993: 1):

In a general sense, brand equity is defined in terms of marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand – for example, when certain outcomes result from the marketing of a product or service because of its brand name which would not occur if the same product or service did not have that name.

From the perspective of the firm, Neumeier (2006: 161) argues that brand equity is explained as the ‘accumulated value of a company’s brand assets’. From the perspective of the consumer, the study of brand equity concentrates on the ethereal aspects; thoughts, feelings, emotions and associations connected to a brand (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

The idea of political parties as brands is now established thanks to the extensive literature on the subject (Harris & Lock, 2001; Smith, 2001; Scammell, 2007; Lees-Marshment, 2009; Jakeli & Tchumburidze, 2012). It is possible to simplistically define the political brand by equating it to the goodwill embodied in a party name (Lott, 1986). However, from a consumer perspective, which places emphasis on the brand as a cognitive construct, French and Smith (2010: 462) assert that ‘the political brand is defined as an associative network of interconnected political information, held in memory and accessible when stimulated from the memory of a voter.’

From our perspective, political brand equity is the effect that can be attributed to a particular political party, those political connotations that are uniquely associated with a party's name, symbols and personnel. We have come up with this definition as there has been very limited examination of political party brand equity, and it is still a relatively new area. Work that has been conducted (French & Smith, 2010; Phipps *et al.*, 2010) makes use of the extant framework by Aaker (1996). As such, various ways of measuring consumer-based brand equity have developed, one of which proposes four areas that need to be taken into account; brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

This project is concerned with examining the final aspect of brand equity, brand associations. Just as French and Smith (2010) postulate that associations act as the basic mental structures from which more complex structures, such as loyalty and perceived brand quality are crafted, this project takes a similar approach and seeks to explore the manner in which the political brand associations, their strength, favourability and uniqueness, as outlined by Keller (1996), affect the brand equity of Irish political parties. As the 'actual associations of the political brand held in the collective memories' of the electorate have not been measured until now 'the true nature of the political brand from an associative network perspective' has remained unknown (French and Smith 2010: 462).

Methodology for Creating Brand Concept Maps of Political Parties

As we are seeking to discover how political brand equity differs across the four largest Irish political parties, from the perspective of the political consumer, we must access the myriad of associations people attribute to those parties. We need to uncover the cognitive structures created around the parties, for a given sample of citizens. We must also uncover the strength, favourability and uniqueness of brand associations that act as the building blocks of brand equity (Keller, 1993). French and Smith's (2010) approach to measuring political brand equity, through the construction of mental maps, provides a unique visual means in aiding our understanding of this concept.

A wide variety of methods for measuring brand equity, from the consumer's perspective, have been developed (Aaker, 1991; Na *et al.*, 1999; Pappu *et al.*, 2005; Srinivasan *et al.*, 2005). It is from these earlier works that French and Smith (2010) developed their ideas for measuring political brand equity. French and Smith (2010) developed a methodology based upon the research of John *et al.* (2006) who recognised the usefulness of using cognitive maps for generating data for understanding the shape, nature and depth of cognitive structures.

Closely following the work of French and Smith (2010) in their pioneering UK study, initially there is an elicitation stage, during which a large sample of undergraduate students at two Dublin universities ($n = 232$) were asked, by means of an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix A, and for an example of a response see Appendix B), to write whatever came to mind when they thought of a given political party. This provides a large body of information, from which distinct associations can

be identified and which re-occur among the respondents. As with French and Smith's (2010: 465) study, 'whilst clearly not representative of the electorate at large' students were selected because 'their relative homogeneity as a group (by age, sex, education, etc.)' means that they represent a segment of the overall population that is distinct, separate and as Calder *et al.* (1981) point out, useful for piloting research before more substantial work is undertaken.

For the elicitation of responses, the following steps are necessary (French & Smith, 2010);

1. Charting the frequency of the associations gathered.
2. Ranking the associations in order of most to least frequent

The second stage of French and Smith's (2010) method for measuring political brand equity involved constructing individual brand concepts maps, that offer a means of visualising associations (John *et al.*, 2006). The data collection device is a blank sheet of paper, upon which each participant constructs their own brand concept map (Appendix C). They may make use of the associations gathered from the elicitation stage if they wish. The construction of a brand concept map is a creative experience and each map should reflect each participant's unique interpretation. Following French and Smith's (2010) method, the sample used in the mapping stage ($n = 76$) was a discrete group of undergraduates from one of the two universities employed in the elicitation stage.

For the second stage, data analysis is more complex. John *et al.* (2006: 555), the creators of the brand concept map methodology, outline five steps for aggregating the individual brand concept maps, in this case 76 maps, into four brand consensus maps, one for each of the parties:

1. Select core brand associations
2. Select first-order brand associations
3. Select core brand association links
4. Select non-core brand association links
5. Select number of connecting lines.

These consensus maps provide an average representation of the cognitive structures of each political brand residing in the minds of the sample population (John *et al.*, 2006).

After the aggregation, it is necessary to assess the centrality of the associations to determine which are most fundamental to the brand. According to French and Smith (2010: 469), three measures are used to achieve this:

1. Degree centrality – how many associations are directly linked to each association;
2. Betweenness centrality – what proportion of geodesic paths in the map links through a certain association; and
3. Closeness centrality – how close an association is to other associations in the map.

As four political parties were analysed, it was necessary to use a much larger sample than French and Smith (2010) utilised in their study of political brand equity in the UK – that only dealt with the British Labour and Conservative parties. The large sample was necessary to first find the most common attributes and associations for the four parties, and second to ensure that there were enough individual maps created for each party to allow for the generation of brand consensus maps for each of the parties. The data gathering phase of this project took place in March and April of 2012.

Limitations of this Approach

Despite the many benefits of using brand concept maps to generate data, there are limitations that must be kept in mind. It is impossible to draw statistically valid conclusions about any populations from the samples. The data generated are only representative of the sample in question, and are only a snapshot of brand equity at a point in time. John *et al.* (2006) state that despite the ability to generate most of the accessible brand associations, the method is not conducive to uncovering deep-rooted associations that might require probing. The fact that the associations tend to be verbal in nature prevents researchers from gathering richer data that may be possible with other techniques, such as interviews or focus groups; techniques where body language and emotions can be observed and recorded in conjunction with verbal responses. Finally, brand consensus maps present the issue of aggregation bias. By aggregating many different maps in an attempt to create a common picture, it is possible that the validity of the data amassed in the individual maps is lost when they are aggregated.

The Brand Associations of the Four Parties

While the aggregation method employed by John *et al.* (2006) and French and Smith (2010) allows the researcher to create simple maps that display how associations are linked to a brand, it excludes certain positive associations not directly linked either to the brand or its core associations. Understanding that these unlinked associations exist, but do not appear on the brand map, may present opportunities for brand managers to forge strong links between them and the brand. Due to the manner in which unlinked associations may affect the equity of a brand, we feel that the absence of such information necessitates a slightly different approach to the aggregation of maps outlined by John *et al.* (2006).

Initial data analysis involved digitising the hand-drawn cognitive maps using the concept mapping and analysis software Visual Understanding Environment. The second stage of analysis was to aggregate the information, producing a single map that can be used to give an overall impression of the general shape of the maps collected. This highlights the common associations, links and patterns within the data. John *et al.* (2006) argue that core associations should appear no less than 50 per cent of the time on all maps, and should be connected by common links that

occur after a given number of times, determined by the inflection point on a frequency plot. Rather than restrict the information to a binary in which associations either appear or not, it was decided that more useful information might be shown by indicating on the aggregated map the percentage of times the association appears on individual maps to allow us to observe certain marginal associations. The parameters for aggregation were set for the creation of an aggregation map in which associations on at least 15 per cent of maps will appear. Fifteen per cent was determined to be the optimum figure for inclusion, as it generates maps that are neither too dense with extraneous information nor too condensed. While common links on at least 10 per cent of maps will appear on the aggregation map. This approach allows us to get a clearer picture of the frequency of individual attributes and examine attributes that do not meet the 50 per cent cut-off point.

The next task was to analyse the valences of the attributes to determine the degree to which respondents viewed a given attribute in a positive, negative or neutral light. This involved assessing each attribute on the aggregation map and tallying the number of times respondents ascribed a plus or minus sign to that attribute on their individual maps. Plus signs were ascribed a numerical value of one, no indication was ascribed a zero and minus signs were ascribed a numerical value of minus one. The average of these figures was derived to determine an average valence for each attribute on the maps.

In summation, by analysing the individual maps, we constructed aggregate maps for each party that shed light on the most common associations and their linkages. Each node on the map represents an association; the positive, negative or absence of a symbol indicates how the association was seen on average by respondents on their individual association maps. The percentage figure indicates the percentage of respondents who included the association on their individual maps. As French and Smith (2010: 468) point out, 'the maps reflect the views held by the sample at a given point in time' – in our case that time is April 2013.

Fianna Fáil

Fianna Fáil had the largest number of individual maps constructed – a total of 31 respondents. While interesting when analysed separately, when these maps are aggregated in [Figure 1](#), they produce some fascinating insights into the manner in which the respondents viewed Fianna Fáil.

At first glance, the overwhelming presence of negative associations, and the dominant position of former leader Bertie Ahern, clearly paints a challenging picture for any brand manager looking to change the image of the Fianna Fáil brand. Despite the fact that Ahern has not been leader of Fianna Fáil since 2008, he was more frequently mentioned by respondents than the current leader, Micheál Martin. In fact, past leaders such as Brian Cowen and Éamon de Valera were mentioned more frequently than the incumbent.

The absence of ideological associations seems to support, to some degree, the claim that traditional lines of political cleavage play less of a role in Irish politics

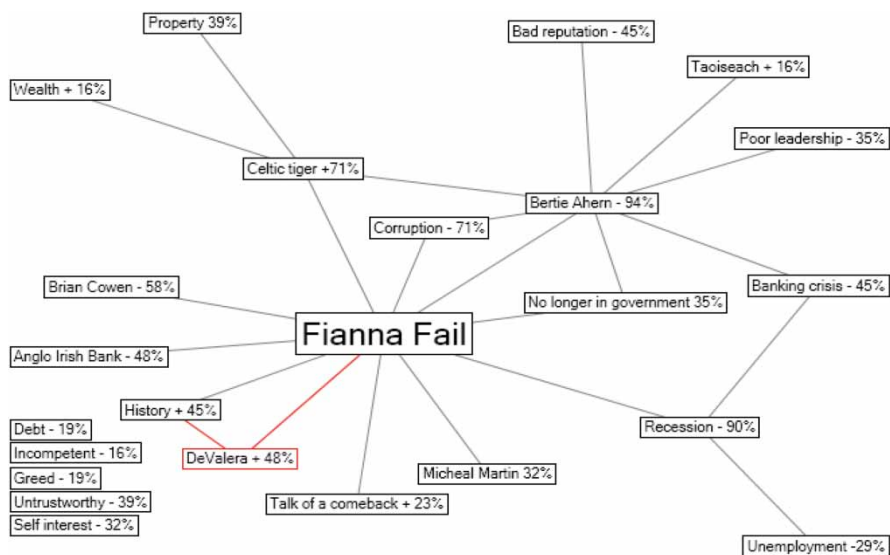


Figure 1. Aggregated brand consensus map of Fianna Fáil

than in other European countries (Mair & Weeks, 2005). According to Kirchheimer's (1966) interpretation of political brands, Fianna Fáil is less inclined to see itself as a brand due to its traditional catch-all nature (Marsh, 2010: 174). Also noteworthy is the separation between the associations of Celtic Tiger and its sub-node of property, and recession and its sub-node banking crisis, that is also linked to Bertie Ahern. This indicates that while the participants directly link the Fianna Fáil brand to the positive association of the Celtic Tiger era and the negative association of the present recession, the two associations are viewed as separate, with no direct relationship to each other. The floating associations of debt, incompetence, greed, untrustworthy and self-interest did not produce enough common links to tie them directly to either the brand or any other associations, yet appeared frequently enough among respondents to warrant observation.

Fine Gael

Fine Gael was the party with the second largest number of participants. Twenty respondents created maps for the Fine Gael brand, producing a less dense map in Figure 2 after aggregating the collective data.

Unlike Fianna Fáil, which possesses a large number of interlinked negative associations centred on the past, Fine Gael has trouble eliciting large numbers of associations with common links. That associations rarely move beyond the first order, or fork into sub associations. This should be worrying for anybody charged with managing the Fine Gael brand – it indicates a weak set of common cognitive structures

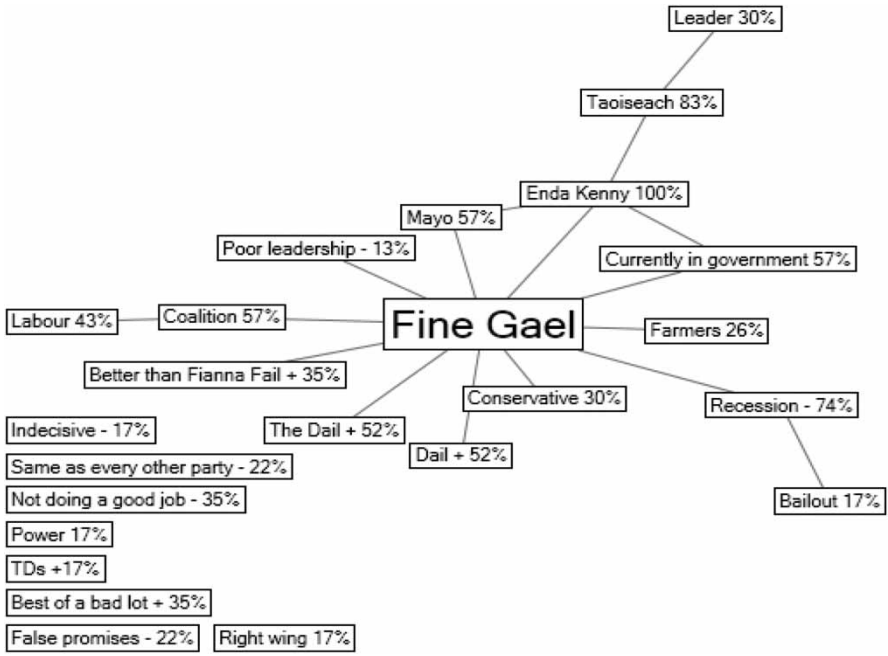


Figure 2. Aggregated brand consensus map of Fine Gael

built around the brand. Enda Kenny appears a key part of the Fine Gael brand, as he is mentioned by all participants and links to a number of other associations. Despite this, Kenny’s place of origin, occupation and the observation that he is currently a member of government, hardly amount to compelling points of long-term differentiation for the brand. As with Fianna Fáil, traditional issues of cleavage hold little sway in the minds of the participants when tasked with creating concept maps around the Fine Gael brand. Conservative is directly linked to Fine Gael and was mentioned by 30 per cent of respondents, while the association for right wing was only mentioned by 17 per cent and failed to form enough common links to create a direct link on the aggregation map. The lack of potency for these associations, in comparison to others such as Enda Kenny, and recession, supports the idea that the left–right spectrum is marginalised in Irish politics.

Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin attracted 14 participants to construct concept maps from the total sample of 76 students. When aggregated, these ultimately produced a map rich with associations, as can be observed in Figure 3.

The dominant position of the associations IRA and Northern Ireland, in the minds of the participants, are immediately noticeable when observing the aggregation map.

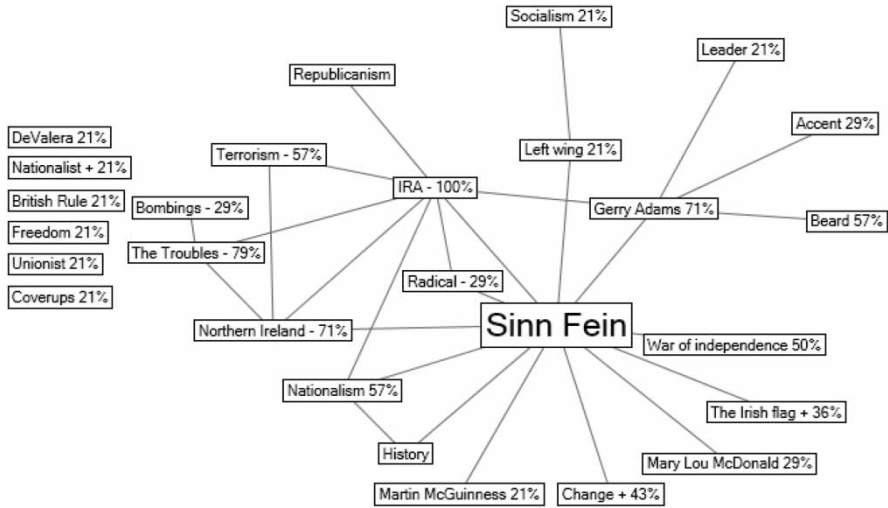


Figure 3. Aggregated brand consensus map of Sinn Féin

As with the preceding political brands, prominent party members feature; although, unlike Fianna Fáil, all of these members are currently in office. Furthermore, unlike the preceding maps, there are no associations that mention the current recession or banking crisis. One might attribute this to the fact that Sinn Féin has perpetually been in opposition, and thus is not linked in the minds of participants to the negative economic associations that plague Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Left–right ideological issues also fail to assert themselves as pillars of the Sinn Féin brand; an association with the left wing only manifested itself on the individual maps of roughly a fifth of respondents. This pales in comparison to the frequency with which the Irish War of Independence, that occurred over 90 years ago, was mentioned on the individual concept maps!

The Labour Party

As Labour attracted only 7 participants out of a sample of 76, the benefits obtained from aggregating such a limited number of maps is questionable. The parameters also had to be modified for aggregation, as the initial settings, with such a low quantity of input data, produced a large map with an equally large amount of questionable output. Therefore, more concrete associations that appear on at least three of the seven Labour maps, appear on the aggregation map in Figure 4. The small number of relatively prominent associations points to a framework for potentially understanding the Labour brand from the perspective of the respondents.

Bearing in mind the limited nature of this aggregation map, it is interesting to note the first significant appearance of ideology as one of the core associations with an

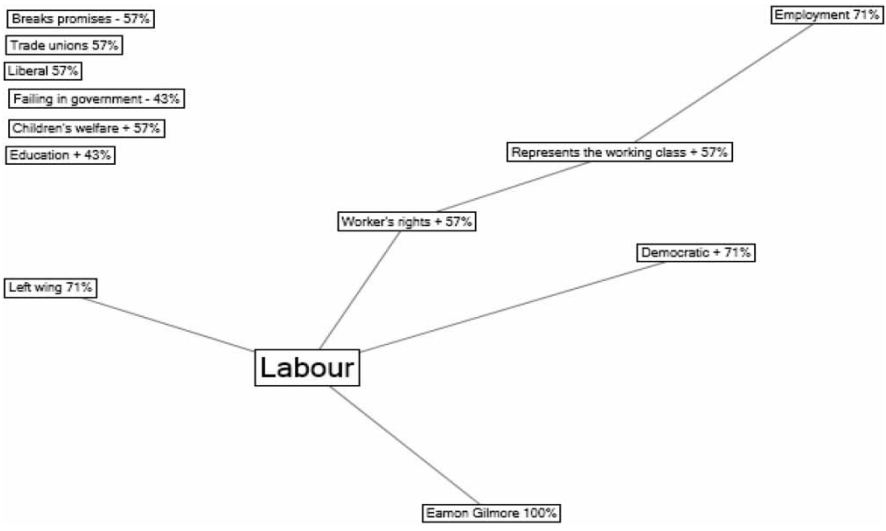


Figure 4. Aggregated brand consensus map of Labour

Irish political brand. Labour was associated with the left wing by most respondents. Eamon Gilmore also appears to play a significant role in relation to the Labour brand, while positive, unconnected, outlying associations, such as education and children’s welfare, were not directly connected to any associations due to the limited nature of the aggregation map.

Assessing the Brand Equity of the Four Parties

Our final task was to determine the strength, favourability and uniqueness of the brand associations generated by the aggregation maps – what Keller (1993) argues constitutes a measure of brand equity. To determine strength, the number of brand associations and their positions as first-, second- or third-degree associations are important, as is the centrality of the associations in determining their importance to the network as a whole. Drawing from research on assessing brand equity by Krishnan (1996), favourability can be determined by assessing the net valence of brand associations, and uniqueness can be determined by identifying the proportion of unique associations that occur for each brand.

Fianna Fáil

French and Smith (2010) acknowledge that while the number of associations present in a concept map indicates a measure of equity for a brand; it should be remembered that this makes no claim on the quality of the equity, which might be good or bad. To demonstrate this point, one might think of the multinational bio-engineering

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corporation Monsanto. Monsanto may lay claim to numerous associations in the minds of consumers, but they are only useful for creating brand equity if they are positive and unique.

The Fianna Fáil aggregation map (Figure 1) produced 23 associations, 18 of which were linked to the brand or other associations, and the remaining 5 were floating associations. To ascertain the degree to which certain associations hold positions of importance for the brand, it is necessary to examine their centrality figures in Table 1. These were calculated for the Fianna Fáil aggregation map.

Degree centrality indicates the number of interconnections between a given association and the surrounding nodes; this can be observed simply by counting the links that stem from the connection. We observe that, ignoring the central node which is Fianna Fáil, Bertie Ahern is the most interconnected node on the map, connecting with eight other nodes. Betweenness centrality, according to Freeman (1979) indicates the number of the shortest paths between two nodes that must ultimately pass through the node in

Table 1. Centrality values for the Fianna Fáil aggregation map

Associations	Degree	Betweenness centrality	Closeness centrality
Anglo Irish Bank	1	0.000	0.024
Bad reputation	1	0.000	0.022
Banking crisis	2	4.000	0.024
Bertie Ahern	8	60.000	0.034
Brian Cowen	1	0.000	0.024
Celtic tiger	4	33.000	0.030
Corruption	2	0.000	0.027
Debt	0	0.000	0.000
DeValera	2	0.000	0.024
Fianna Fáil	11	103.500	0.040
Greed	0	0.000	0.000
History	2	0.000	0.024
Incompetent	0	0.000	0.000
Micheal Martin	1	0.000	0.024
No longer in government	2	0.000	0.027
Poor leadership	1	0.000	0.022
Property	1	0.000	0.020
Recession	3	20.500	0.026
Self-interest	0	0.000	0.000
Talk of a comeback	1	0.000	0.024
Taoiseach	1	0.000	0.022
Unemployment	1	0.000	0.018
Untrustworthy	0	0.000	0.000
Wealth	1	0.000	0.020

question. Nodes with a high level of betweenness centrality are, in the case of brand maps, associations that occupy important mental bottlenecks, generating and linking themselves to numerous other associations. Closeness centrality is a representation of how close any given association is to all others connected on the map. This is why we can observe that Fianna Fáil has the largest number, while floating associations, not connected to the map, have no centrality values at all.

The Fianna Fáil aggregation map is highly dependent on four nodes for maintaining its current structure. Given the negative aspect of the associations Bertie Ahern and Recession, that occupy central and strong positions on the map, a significant impact might be made on brand equity among the sample of students if Fianna Fáil was able to distance itself from these negative associations. The net valence arrived at by subtracting the sum of positive associations from the sum of negative associations and dividing the resulting figure by the total number of associations, produces a favourability score (French & Smith, 2010) for the Fianna Fáil brand of $(-8/23) - 0.35$ (see Table 5), where 1.0 is indicative of complete favourability. This shows that despite the fact that Fianna Fáil managed to elicit a large number of associations from the respondents, the brand construct is negative.

Finally, with regard to uniqueness, the aggregate map produced four associations that were common to other political parties, namely Taoiseach, poor leadership, history and De Valera. Eighty-three per cent of the Fianna Fáil aggregate map comprised unique associations.

Fine Gael

As with Fianna Fáil, the aggregation map for Fine Gael produced a total of 23 brand associations. A difference arises though when examining the types of association. The lack of common links between the Fine Gael associations prevented the formation of a map (Figure 2) akin in structure to that for Fianna Fáil. Instead, eight floating associations came into existence after aggregation, indicating that the overall structure of the Fine Gael brand is weaker than Fianna Fáil.

Centrality values for the Fine Gael aggregate map can be observed in Table 2. In contrast to the Fianna Fáil centrality table, none of the nodes bar for Fine Gael, the brand itself, have a high degree of connectivity. Nor do they act as sparks which ignite a flurry of imagination generating more associations. The nodes are also distributed roughly equally from one another, as indicated by their closeness centrality. Unlike Fianna Fáil, removing any single node is unlikely to have an overwhelming impact on the structure of the aggregate map and thus the overall brand position and value attributed to it by the sample of political consumers in question.

Calculating favourability and uniqueness, we determine that Fine Gael has a better, albeit negative, favourability score of -0.04 and the same percentage of unique associations as Fianna Fáil, 83 per cent (see Table 5). It is hard to determine which party has the more enviable position vis-à-vis negative brand equity among the sampled students. On the one hand, the Fianna Fáil brand has a high number of negative brand associations; and while Fine Gael manages to avoid many of these, it still

Table 2. Centrality values for the Fine Gael aggregation map

Associations	Degree	Betweenness centrality	Closeness centrality
Bailout	1	0.000	0.022
Best of a bad lot	0	0.000	0.000
Better than Fianna Fáil	1	0.000	0.029
Coalition	2	14.000	0.031
Conservative	1	0.000	0.029
Currently in government	2	0.000	0.032
Dail	1	0.000	0.029
Enda Kenny	4	26.500	0.036
False promises	0	0.000	0.000
Farmers	1	0.000	0.029
Fine Gael	11	93.500	0.050
Indecisive	0	0.000	0.000
Labour	1	0.000	0.022
Leader	1	0.000	0.019
Mayo	2	0.000	0.032
Not doing a good job	0	0.000	0.000
Poor leadership	1	0.000	0.029
Power	0	0.000	0.000
Recession	2	14.000	0.031
Right wing	0	0.000	0.000
Same as every other party	0	0.000	0.000
Taoiseach	2	14.000	0.025
Teachtaí Dála	0	0.000	0.000
The Dail	1	0.000	0.029

finds itself in a negative position in relation to favourability and comes out worse in terms of strength and centrality of important associations.

Sinn Féin

The Sinn Féin aggregation map produced 26 brand associations, 20 of which were linked to other associations and 6 of which were floating associations. This indicates that Sinn Féin is a stronger political brand among the participants than either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. It can be seen in [Figure 3](#) that the brand is centred on a small number of associations; one of which, the IRA, is negative. The centrality values for the Sinn Féin aggregate map can be found in [Table 3](#).

The Sinn Féin aggregate map produces a favourability score of -0.11 and can claim uniqueness for approximately 85 per cent of its associations (see [Table 5](#)). This puts Sinn Féin in a marginally better position than Fianna Fáil which harbours a greater proportion of negative associations than positive, yet behind Fine Gael.

Table 3. Centrality values for the Sinn Féin aggregation map

Associations	Degree	Betweenness centrality	Closeness centrality
Accent	1	0.000	0.018
Beard	1	0.000	0.018
Bombings	1	0.000	0.015
British rule	0	0.000	0.000
Change	1	0.000	0.021
Cover-ups	0	0.000	0.000
DeValera	0	0.000	0.000
Freedom	0	0.000	0.000
Gerry Adams	5	54.000	0.027
History	2	0.000	0.021
IRA	8	59.500	0.030
Leader	1	0.000	0.018
Left wing	2	19.000	0.022
Martin McGuinness	1	0.000	0.021
Mary Lou McDonald	1	0.000	0.021
Nationalism	3	2.000	0.024
Northern Ireland	4	14.000	0.025
Radical	2	0.000	0.023
Republicanism	1	0.000	0.019
Sinn Fein	12	127.500	0.034
Socialism	1	0.000	0.015
Terrorism	2	0.000	0.020
The Irish flag	1	0.000	0.021
The Troubles	3	19.000	0.020
Unionist	0	0.000	0.000
War of independence	1	0.000	0.021

Given the degree of centrality of certain brand associations such as the IRA; from the perspective of this sample of political consumers, it would be pertinent for anybody looking to manage the Sinn Féin brand to attempt to disassemble the link between such a prevalent, negative and very central association.

The Labour Party

Finally, bearing in mind the limitations of using the current Labour aggregation map (Figure 4) to draw any detailed analysis, we must bypass the issue of gauging strength through brand associations, as the limited number of maps prevents useful data from being gathered after aggregation. Even the centrality values from the analysis of the Labour map present little information worthy of analysis, as can be given in Table 4.

Table 4. Centrality values for the Labour aggregation map

Associations	Degree	Betweenness centrality	Closeness centrality
Breaks promises	0	0.000	0.000
Children's welfare	0	0.000	0.000
Democratic	1	0.000	0.071
Eamon Gilmore	1	0.000	0.071
Education	0	0.000	0.000
Employment	1	0.000	0.056
Failing in government	0	0.000	0.000
Labour	4	12.000	0.111
Left wing	1	0.000	0.071
Liberal	0	0.000	0.000
Represents the working class	2	5.000	0.077
Trade unions	0	0.000	0.000
Worker's rights	2	8.000	0.100

Table 5. The brand equity of the four parties

	Strength	Uniqueness (%)	Favourability (range 1 to -1)
Fianna Fáil	18L + 5F	83	-0.35
Fine Gael	15L + 8F	83	-0.04
Sinn Féin	20L + 6F	85	-0.11
Labour	6L + 6F	92	+0.25

Note: F, free; L, linked.

The link between the Labour brand, worker's rights and working class representation indicates that these associations are central to the brand.

The only interesting aspect of the Labour brand is that it may be the only party to possess positive political brand equity judging from the responses of the seven participants and the subsequent aggregation map generated. Five positive brand associations reveal themselves on the aggregate map, while two negatives surface as floating associations. The overall favourability score was (3/12) +0.25. The uniqueness of associations on the aggregate map, at 92 per cent, was also higher than the other political parties – left wing being an association shared with Sinn Féin (Table 5).

Findings

In summation, among the sample of 76 students involved in the brand mapping stage, the overwhelming picture of equity in Irish political brands was negative. Fianna Fáil is in the worst position with strong levels of negative favourability, arguably followed

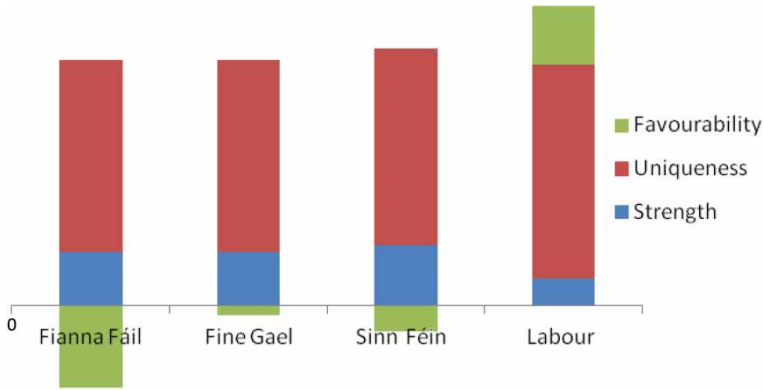


Figure 5. Visual representation of brand equity of the four parties

by Sinn Féin which is slightly less unpopular. Fine Gael and Labour fare better, with the former being less unpopular than Fianna Fáil, yet still not breaking the zero-point in terms of favourability; the latter manages to display a positive favourability score and a high level of brand uniqueness (Figure 5), but as mentioned, the lack of respondents is bound to create a certain level of aggregation bias. It is noteworthy that Fine Gael seems to be a brand lacking strong and meaningful associations.

As with French and Smith’s (2010) findings in the UK, we can see the importance of the party leader to the party’s brand. Enda Kenny and Gerry Adams are both closely associated with their parties’ brands, the links being weaker in the case of Eamon Gilmore. Former party leaders Bertie Ahern and Brian Cowan are still closely connected with the Fianna Fáil brand, similar to what French and Smith (2010) found in the UK with Tony Blair’s association with the Labour Party brand. Like Blair, Ahern’s connection with Fianna Fáil links that party to the negatives associated with the former Taoiseach.

Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had the same number of brand associations, although the latter possessed more floating associations, and whereas the majority of Fianna Fáil’s associations were negative this was not the case with Fine Gael. Interestingly, Sinn Féin possessed more brand associations than either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, and far more than the Labour Party. Each party has a high level of unique brand associations and resultant maps; however, the fact that these are not all positive or strong is a problem. As French and Smith (2010) found, this nevertheless contradicts the notion that parties are becoming increasingly similar.

All of the parties, apart from Fianna Fáil, tend to maintain their historical brand associations. Fine Gael is linked with large farmers and conservatism, Sinn Féin with nationalism and Northern Ireland, and Labour with left wing politics and workers’ rights. Only Fianna Fáil, through its mismanagement of the economy, has largely severed its links with its historical brand associations, being largely associated with the economic debacle. The brand consensus maps for the Irish parties are similar

in this respect to what French and Smith (2010) found in the UK – parties strongly tied to ‘traditional issues’ as opposed to more contemporary subjects such as the environment.

However, we have to be careful not to compare too closely our findings with those of French and Smith (2010). The UK is a very different polity, they examined only two political parties in a country where coalition governments are the exception and not the rule, and Ireland was experiencing a severe economic crisis at the time our study was conducted.

Conclusion

Assessing the brand equity of the four largest Irish political parties – through looking at the strength, favourability and uniqueness of their brand associations (Keller, 1993) – we see that although there is no quantifiable figure that can be used to rank the parties; a certain hierarchy can be observed. Understanding that brand equity is ‘the differential effect of brand associations on consumer response to the brand’ (French & Smith, 2010: 462), we observe that the party with the worst level of political brand equity among the sampled students was Fianna Fáil. The strong links to negative associations such as corruption, and the dominant position of former leaders, demonstrated that serious changes would need to be made to sever these associations and attempt to condition the sample to view the brand in a different light.

For Fine Gael, despite being slightly more popular than Fianna Fáil, it appears that the students had trouble forming common links between the brand associations mentioned. This indicates that while Fine Gael is more popular than Fianna Fáil, this is not through any specific policies, or striking features. The brand association which indicated that Fine Gael was ‘the same as every other party’ even made it onto the aggregation map as a floating association. The lack of numerous interlinking associations is a worry for Fine Gael’s brand equity. Cognitive maps which possess many interlinking nodes are stronger than those that do not. Fine Gael is far from creating such a cognitive map in the minds of the students involved.

Despite strong negative brand associations linking Sinn Féin to the IRA, a number of positive associations were found. Coupled with a strong associative network, the Sinn Féin aggregation map possessed the largest number of brand associations for any party. It also managed to avoid some of the negative associations attributed to Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Labour only received a small number of respondents, and while the results appear to show that Labour has the best brand equity of the parties, there were too few maps.

It is interesting to note the way in which the individual and aggregated brand concept maps conformed to academic discourse on the unusual nature of the Irish political system; that it cannot be assessed in terms of traditional cleavage lines (Marks & Wilson, 2000). The only party for which left–right ideology played a dominant role was Labour, whereas the other parties elicited stronger associations on nationalistic or current issues.

One of the objectives of this paper was to determine, with a healthy level of scepticism, if the methods for assessing brand equity, from the perspective of the consumer, could be used in relation to Irish political parties. After engaging with over 300 participants – and recognising that it is impossible to draw statistically valid conclusions about any population from the samples used, and that brand equity is in a constant state of flux – we respond tentatively in the affirmative. The results from the sample of 76 participants during the mapping phase, while far from representative, indicate that a larger study on a similar basis would not only be possible, but would likely generate interesting results for understanding many different associations which form the brand equity of Irish political parties.

The approach set out here has the potential to discover a range of political brand associations; identify their strength, favourability and uniqueness; and thus articulate and uncover the brand equity of a political party in any jurisdiction. The approach shows why political science, as a discipline, must seek to better understand the importance of branding – as identifying negative, or weak, brand associations could result in remedial actions being instigated, enabling parties to change those qualities that the public does not like; while identifying positive, strong or unique brand associations could enable parties to emphasise those qualities that the public associates with and likes. The identification of unexpected brand associations may present to parties an attribute of themselves that they had previously not considered.

The actual process of data gathering – in the elicitation and brand mapping phases – is straightforward for both the researchers and the participants involved, making this an attractive research tool. As such, this approach could be of value to the political parties themselves – as it would enable them to periodically track their brand equity. Thus, the results derived from this approach provide another means of investigating and understanding the public's perception of political parties and politics.

Note

1. Byrne and O'Malley (2011) have recently argued that there is in fact a cleavage basis for support in the Irish party system, and this is based upon divisions and migrations that took place a thousand years ago.

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Appendix A: Elicitation Sheet

Elicitation

1) From the list below, please select the party for which you have the greatest affinity:

- a. Fine Gael
- b. Labour
- c. Fianna Fáil
- d. Sinn Féin
- or
- e. Uncommitted

2) Please write below any associations that come to mind when thinking of the party chosen above:

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Appendix B: Sample of Completed Elicitation Sheet

Male Female

Elicitation

1) From the list below, please select the party for which you have the greatest affinity:

- a. Fine Gael
- b. Labour
- c. Fianna Fáil
- d. Sinn Féin
- or
- e. Uncommitted

2) Please write below any associations that come to mind when thinking of the party chosen above:

- 11 - Bertie
- Brian Cowen
- Long history in politics
- Recently increased opinion (surprisingly)
- storied past
- Lack of trust
- Relationship with Anglo/Irish
- Nationwide / Developers
- Good Friday Agreement
- DeValera.
- 10) - 2007 / 2008 Economic downturn.

Appendix C: Individual brand concept map

