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The implementation of gender quotas in Ireland: opportunities, challenges, controversies and success

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1. Women and politics in Ireland: An overview

Despite early suffrage and initial achievements such as the election of Constance Markievicz in 1918, and her appointment to cabinet, one of the first women worldwide to attain such office, women's political representation in Ireland has remained low. Post-independence "the social conservatism that pervaded Irish political culture and society for much of the 20th century resulted in social and legal barriers for women accessing work outside the home and entering into public life" (Buckley and Hofman, 2015: 80). A "congruence between public, political and cultural institutions" saw a "naturalisation of male dominance in decision-making" (Buckley et al, 2015: 8). The impact of this can be seen in the numbers of women TDs¹ elected in the 50 year period post-independence. Just 23 women were elected during this time and many of these were related to male politicians an "indicator of the gendered conservatism of Irish politics, where women had to rely on male networks to gain power" (Buckley et al, 2015: 6). There were more women elected to Dáil Éireann in 1921 (six) than there were in 1973 (four). Second-wave feminism, Ireland's accession to the then European and Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, economic modernisation, and growing secularism saw a relaxing of social conservative attitudes in Irish society from the late 1980s onwards. Female employment rates increased steadily during this period, rising from 27 % of the workforce in 1973 to 35 % in 1987, 42 % in 1997 and a peak of 60.5 % in 2008, before falling to 55.9 % following the 2008 economic crash (2014)². However, an expectant and concurrent increase in women's political representation did not emerge. Research has identified male incumbency, masculinised party cultures, decentralised candidate selection processes and the gate-keeping functions of political parties as key barriers to women's political candidacy in Ireland (Buckley, 2013: 341 – 359), restricting women's access to the ballot paper, and severely limiting opportunities for women's election. In addition, individual level dynamics such as availability of time and funding as well as motivational factors such as confidence, ambition and political interest also shape women's access to public life. Colloquially these supply and demand factors are referred to as the '5 Cs' of Care, Cash, Confidence, Culture and Candidate Selection.

A review of the membership of Dáil Éireann (lower house of parliament) from 1973 to 2011 (see Table 1) shows that the proportion of women's representation never rose above 15.1 %. Indeed the total number of women elected at Dáil elections between

¹ TD or Teachta Dála is a Gaelic term for member of Dáil Éireann (Parliament).

² Female employment rates sourced from the European Commission office, Dublin - http://ec.europa.eu/ireland/ireland_in_the_eu/impact_of_eu_on_irish_women/index_en.htm#1 (accessed 27 May 2016)

1918 and 2011 was 95; the comparable figure for men was 1150. Related to this is the male dominance of cabinet government. Of the 196 people who have served as cabinet ministers in Ireland, just 17 have been women. Gendered patterns can be observed in portfolio assignments with women ministers more likely than men to be appointed to socio-cultural positions.

Table 1: Number & proportion of women candidates and TDs, Irish general elections, 1973 – 2011

<i>Election</i>	<i>Candidates</i>			<i>TDs</i>		
	Total	Women	%	Total	Women	%
1973	334	16	4.8	144	4	2.8
1977	376	25	6.6	148	6	4.1
1981	404	41	10.1	166	11	6.6
1982 (Feb)	366	35	9.6	166	8	4.8
1982 (Nov)	365	31	8.5	166	14	8.4
1987	466	65	13.9	166	14	8.4
1989	371	52	14.0	166	13	7.8
1992	482	89	18.5	166	20	12.0
1997	484	96	19.8	166	20	12.0
2002	463	84	18.1	166	22	13.3
2007	471	82	17.4	166	22	13.3
2011	566	86	15.2	166	25	15.1

In other elected institutions, the proportion of female politicians is better. This is not unusual as research demonstrates that political parties are more open to diversifying their candidate lists in second-order elections. In the most recent Seanad (upper house of parliament) the proportion of women senators stood at 32 % while six of the 11 MEPs (55 %) are women. At the sub-national level, women's representation in local government stands at just under 21.5 %. This is a record high for women's political representation at this level in Ireland growing gradually from 8 % in 1985 to 15 % in 1999 to 21 % at the 2014 local elections. However, it still places Ireland behind the EU average of 35.3 %. Research demonstrates the importance of local government experience in the political career development of women politicians in Ireland showing that it is more statistically significant for women than men (Buckley et al, 2015). An under-representation of women at this level stymies opportunities to advance to more senior political office.

1.1. Addressing the under-representation of women in Irish politics

The economic crash of 2008 propelled the issue of political reform onto the political agenda with demands for change and democratic renewal. As part of this reform agenda, two parliamentary committees examined the role of women in Irish politics - a sub-committee of the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights and the Joint Committee on the Constitution. The former advocated the introduction of a legislative candidate selection quota. The latter recommended that the public funding of parties be 'regulated so that a proportion of the funding allocated to a

party would be determined by the number of women candidates it nominates for election³. The findings of these committees were pivotal to the legislation that followed (Buckley, 2013: 353). Concurrently a grassroots campaign mobilised to highlight the under-representation of women in Irish politics and advocate for affirmative action to redress the gender imbalance⁴. The alliance of these groups, working together with high profile feminist politicians, as well as the parliamentary deliberations, brought a level of attention to the issue rarely seen before in Ireland (Buckley, 2013). Soon after the 2011 general election, the new government announced its intention to introduce legislation that would link the state funding of political parties to the percentage of women candidates selected to contest general elections. The *Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act* was passed in July 2012 with the support of all parties. It incentivises political parties to select at least 30 % female candidates and at least 30 % male candidates. Non-compliant parties surrender half of the state funding they receive on an annual basis to run their operations. The gender quota threshold rises to 40 % from 2023 onwards⁵. The legislative gender quota applies at the national level only.

2. Gender quotas in Ireland

The February 2016 general election was the first at which gender quotas applied. Of the 551 candidates who contested the election, 163 were women (29.6 %), the highest number and proportion of women candidates to ever contest a general election in Ireland. All political parties increased their proportion of women candidates since the 2011 general election and met, in most cases exceeded, the 30 % gender quota threshold (see Table 2). Left-of-centre political parties had a tendency to select higher proportions of women candidates than those on the centre-right. The number and proportion of women independent candidates also increased. While further research is required, it may indicate a spill-over effect whereby the discourse surrounding gender quotas may have had a mobilising effect, encouraging non-party women to politically engage.

Table 2: Women candidates and TDs, 2016 general election

Party	Women candidates N (%)	Women's candidacy Percentage point difference 2011 - 2016	Women TDs N (%)
Fianna Fáil	22 (31.0)	+16.3	6 (13.6)
Fine Gael	27 (30.7)	+15.3	11 (22.0)
Labour	13 (36.1)	+9.6	2 (28.6)
Sinn Féin	18 (36.0)	+16.5	6 (26.0)
Greens	14 (35.0)	+16.4	1 (50.0)
AAA-PBP	13 (42.0)	-	2 (33.3)
Renua	8 (30.8)	-	0
Social Democrats	6 (42.9)	-	2 (66.6)
Independents	33 (20.0)	+10.4	5 (21.7)
Others	9 (30.0)	+24.1	0
Total	163 (29.6)	+14.4	35 (22.2)

³ Joint Committee on the Constitution *Fourth Report: Review of the Electoral System for the election of members to Dáil Éireann*, (Dublin: Government Publications, 2010), p.18 - http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/committees30thdail/j-constitution/report_2008/20100722.pdf (accessed 28 May 2016)

⁴ Groups included The 5050 Group, Women for Election, the National Women's Council of Ireland and Labour Women.

⁵ To be in receipt of state funding, parties must be registered and achieve at least two % of the first preference vote at the preceding general election.

2.1. Implementing gender quotas: controversies and challenges

Across the four main political parties of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and Labour a total of 80 women were selected to contest the election. Of the 80, 11 were selected via a gender directive issued at selection convention while 20 were added-on by party headquarters (as were 14 men) following the completion of selection conventions. Thus the majority of women candidates were selected without the use of a gender directive signifying that the main achievement of gender quotas was that it increased the supply and demand of women candidates, instilling a cultural change within political parties whereby party strategists embraced gendered recruitment processes, encouraging, equipping and asking women to run for election (Buckley et al, 2016 forthcoming).

Where gender directives were issued by party headquarters, eight were issued on a dual candidate ticket – one man; one woman - while three were issued on a single candidate strategy – one female candidate was selected. The introduction of gender quotas saw a layering of this *formal* requirement onto existing *informal* selection criteria such as geography, incumbency and the favouring of certain candidates who are usually well connected and resourced male party members (Kenny, 2013).

The issuing of gender directives saw tensions emerge between party headquarters and constituency level parties. This is nothing new in Irish politics as constituency level parties strive to protect their selection autonomy against what they perceive as centralised and managed democracy within political parties (Weeks, 2007). In one constituency the local party signalled that they would select an ‘unofficial’ candidate to run against the selected female candidate. They didn’t, but many party members refused to canvas for the selected woman. In another constituency a male party member took a constitutional challenge against gender quotas. The case was dismissed as it was adjudged that the plaintiff did not have *locus standi* to take such a case but it highlighted the controversies, challenges and tensions that emerged as gender quotas were rolled out (Buckley et al, 2016 forthcoming).

The implementation of gender quotas has been revelatory of the masculinised nature of the concept of local party democracy in Ireland as well as the masculinised culture of politics more generally (Buckley et al, 2016 forthcoming). Claims that women were being selected on the basis of their biological sex rather than ability were made. Yet male meritocracy was rarely questioned. As Table 3 illustrates, the vast majority of women candidates, like their male counterparts, were not electoral newcomers (Buckley et al, 2016 forthcoming).

Table 3: Percentage of female and male candidates with previous office-holding experience

Party	Female Candidates	Male Candidates
	%	%
All candidates	52	61
Fianna Fáil	73	86
Fine Gael	74	97
Labour	92	100
Sinn Féin	72	88

Of those women elected, all bar one had previous office-holding experience. A majority (83 %) served in local government at some stage in their political careers confirming

again the importance of local government experience in the political career pipeline of women politicians in Ireland (Buckley et al, 2016 forthcoming).

2.2. The impact of gender quotas

The 2016 general election saw a 40 % increase on the number of women elected in 2011. Of the 35 women elected, 16 are incumbents and 19 are new female TDs, the highest number of non-incumbent women ever elected in a single Dáil election. Dáil Éireann now consists of 22 % women TDs, far from parity, but the highest proportion of women deputies in the history of the state (Buckley et al, 2016 forthcoming). There was a seven percentage point increase in women's representation in the Dáil between the 2011 and 2016 general elections. Prior to the introduction of gender quotas it took 22 years and five electoral cycles to see such an increase. Thus, gender quotas have been considered a success in Ireland.

While female candidates won over half a million votes (25 % of the total votes cast) for the first time, a gender gap has emerged in the success rates between male and female candidates. Whereas 31 % of male candidates won election, the corresponding rate for female candidates was 21.5 %. This bucks trends at recent elections where the gender gap in success rates was negligible. Research is required to assess the reason(s) for this trend change but two likely explanations may account for this outcome. Firstly, the late addition of some women to party tickets curtailed sufficient campaign time to build profile and name recognition. Secondly, in the case of gendered balanced tickets, women often occupied the position of 'running mate' to a lead male candidate, sweeping up votes to be ultimately transferred to the lead candidate (Buckley et al, 2016 forthcoming). Of the 35 women elected, 26 represent a constituency in either Dublin or the commuter-belt region indicating the continuing presence of an urban/rural divide in terms of the geographical bases of women TDs.

3. Knowledge exchange: opportunities and constraints

The Slovenian and French case-studies offer Ireland some useful instruction and guidance for the implementation of gender quotas. These case-studies also draw attention to constraints that negate against effective implementation. However, knowledge exchange flows both ways, and lessons can also be learned from the Irish experience of gender quota adoption and implementation.

Alliances are important in the adoption of gender quotas

As seen in all three cases, a collaborative approach between public representatives, grassroots activism, the women's movement and the legislative process are essential in raising awareness about the under-representation of women in politics and mobilising support for affirmative action.

Gender quotas increase women's political representation

In all three cases the adoption of gender quotas has seen numerical advances in women's political representation, albeit at varying levels of increase. The French case is particularly instructive in this regard. Following 16 years of the Parité Law, the increases in women's political representation have been modest. However, the

situation could be worse if not for gender quotas. The French case demonstrates that where parties/institutions are not subject to legal sanctions or incentives, the masculine status quo continues. This indicates that when left to their own initiative, political parties are unlikely to engage in gendered recruitment practices.

Differential impact of incentive measures

Across the three case-studies, Slovenia's list rejection system, followed by the Irish system of reduced State funding, have been effective in incentivising political parties to select the requisite proportion of women candidates. The financial penalty system in France has not resulted in the uniform application of gender quotas, as the financial loss to some of the larger parties has been relatively minor. Penalties for non-compliance have been increased in France. It will be interesting to observe the impact of this in future elections.

Application of gender quotas at all levels of the political system

In Slovenia and France, gender quotas are in place at multiple levels of government - local, national and European. In Ireland, gender quotas apply only at the national level. Given the significance of local government experience to the electoral prospects of women candidates in Dáil elections, the implementation of quotas at local elections would facilitate the election of higher numbers of women. This in turn would increase the supply of high quality women candidates with local profile, name recognition and elected office experience to contest Dáil elections. The introduction of gender quotas at the local level may also encourage more women from rural areas to contest for political office. In doing so, it may contribute to reducing the rural/urban gap that has emerged in women's candidacy and election rates at the national level.

Introduce other gender rules to work in tandem with gender quotas

In tandem with gender quotas, Slovenia and France use gender rules such as placement mandates and zipper systems, as well as informal ones such as the selection of women candidates in winnable or safe seats, to ensure effective implementation of gender quotas. These are used at the multiple levels of the political system (though not at the national level in Slovenia). These are not used in Ireland and are unlikely to be. Firstly, candidates are listed alphabetically on the ballot paper making the implementation of placement mandates impossible at the current time. However, there have been calls to randomise the ballot paper. If this is realised, then placement mandates maybe possible. Secondly, under the vagaries of PR-STV, the concept of safe seats is not a widespread phenomenon in Ireland.

Strong party leadership

Across the three case-studies it is clear that gender quotas are easier to integrate with PR-Lists rather than majoritarian or PR-STV electoral systems. As seen in the Irish case, the decentralised nature of candidate selection saw tensions emerge between party headquarters and the constituency parties over the issuing of gender directives. However, such tensions are not new, and similar to controversies over geography and the number of candidates to be selected in any given constituency, the party leadership stood steadfast in the face of local resistance.

Party spending on the promotion of women

In Ireland political parties must report to the Standards in Political Office how much money they spend on the promotion of women on an annual basis. Slovenia may learn

from the Ireland in this regard as parties there are not obliged to report such information.

4. Recommendations and conclusions

To ensure further increases in the number of women accessing public life in Ireland, the following are recommended:

- Introduce gender quotas at local elections;
- Monitor political party gender recruitment practices including female party membership rates, the level of female party office-holders, party spend on the promotion of women, and the implementation of gender quotas at election time;
- To redress the urban/rural gap in female candidacy, roll out capacity training and mentoring workshops for rural-based women to encourage and support their political activism and candidacy;
- Where co-options and by-elections occur to fill seats vacated by previous office-holders, political parties should actively seek women candidates to contest for these vacancies.

The three case-studies also raise some important questions that require further discussion and deliberation such as:

- Gender quotas have increased in the number of women elected, but it is important to ask who holds the power in political organisations and where does it lie? Do leadership positions continue to be male dominated?
- The introduction of gender quotas may contribute to female empowerment and increase the number of women politicians contesting and being elected, but does it result in the gender transformation of the political institutions to which these women are elected?
- What other 'opportunities' exist for the advancement of women? Anti-establishment politics has seen the emergence of new parties, free of the masculinised legacies of older, more established parties. Are these more open to women candidates? Or is ideology still important with new 'left' parties more likely than new 'right' parties to select women candidates? The fragmentation of the party system has facilitated the emergence of more independent candidates? Is this a facilitating route for women to access politics?
- Quotas increase the election of women but which women are being selected and elected? Is she different/similar to her male counterparts in terms of age, ideological outlook, education, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, electoral experience, etc?
- Does the substantive representation of women increase following the adoption of gender quotas?

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