

How Ireland legislated for candidate sex quotas to increase women's representation

By Democratic Audit

*Almost a century after the first female MP was elected, women still comprise only a fifth of the House of Commons. One of the measures suggested for remedying this inequality is the use of gender quotas for parliamentary candidates. Here, the UK could learn from Ireland, where a law introducing a quota was passed in 2012. **Fiona Buckley** looks back at the debate in Ireland, and highlights the potential challenges of implementing the legislation.*

In July 2012

the Irish

Parliament passed legislation that will oblige political parties to introduce sex quotas (more commonly known as gender quotas) for candidate selection at future general elections. The Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 provides for a 30% quota at the next general election, rising to 40% seven years thereafter. Parties who fail to comply will lose half of their annual State funding.

Today there are just 26 women deputies, or TDs, in Dáil Éireann – the lower house of the Irish parliament – representing a *record* percentage high of 15.7%. This compares to the 23% of seats filled by women MPs in the UK House of Commons. Of the total 4744 Dáil seats filled since the first election in 1918, only 260 (6%) have been occupied by women. In total, only 92 women have ever served as TDs. While the descriptive data clearly highlights the severe under-representation of women in Irish politics, sex quotas as a mechanism for increasing women's participation were not always the preferred solution. In the past, most parties shied away from advocating sex quotas, preferring instead the use of 'soft' promotional measures. In light of much resistance to quotas across the political party spectrum, it is thus interesting to observe and examine how legislative sex quotas were adopted in Ireland. This blog argues that their adoption was facilitated by a constellation of pressures, notably a *political reform discourse*, the *mobilisation of civic society groups*, and *elite support*.

Legislating for candidate sex quotas

The economic woes of the Republic of Ireland are well documented. The system shock caused by the economic collapse generated a critical and prolonged focus on the Irish political system. Questions about the nature of political life surfaced, and a national debate about the personalism inherent in politics and the lack of diversity ensued. In response, the Irish Parliament engaged in a *political reform discourse*, a part of which was an examination of the role of women in political decision-making. Two parliamentary committees were initiated to consider possible strategies to redress the gender imbalance in political representation – one specifically looking at women's participation in politics, the other reviewing the electoral system to assess its performance against a range of criteria including the representation of women. At these forums, women's political under-representation was problematised as being anti-democratic and exclusionary, generated by patriarchal structures and gender inequality in Irish society. The committee hearings produced a set of recommendations to address the gender imbalance in Irish politics, one of which was a legislative candidate selection quota, modelled on the Belgian [Smet-Tobback Law](#), obliging political parties 'to impose a maximum limit on the proportion of candidates of any one gender selected to run in elections'. The findings of these committees were to be pivotal in the quota debate that followed.

The quota debate sprang to public consciousness in August 2010 when an article in the *Irish Times* newspaper reported the findings of a survey which showed that a [majority of women TDs](#) were against quotas as a means of increasing women's political representation. The report sparked a lively public debate. In September 2010, the debate continued at a conference in University College Cork which engaged the interest of academics, citizens and political representatives, from which the *5050 Group* emerged. This group set about campaigning for the introduction of legislative quotas in Irish elections, based on the recommendations of the aforementioned parliamentary committees. The group held a number of public meetings to discuss the under-representation of women in Irish politics, developed a social media information campaign on affirmative action and lobbied politicians in all political parties to legislate for quotas. This was the beginning of a political *mobilisation of civil society* women's organisations on women's political representation. The *Longford Women's Link* and *Women's Manifesto*, *Women into Public Life* and *Women for Election* ran campaigns to increase women's participation in public life. Together with the *National Women's Council of Ireland* and *Labour Women*, the women's section of the Labour party, the capacity generated by these groups, combined with the political reform movement and parliamentary reports, gave the issue of women's political under-representation a profile and momentum rarely seen before.

In May 2011, after just two months in office, the new coalition government announced its intention to introduce legislation whereby the state funding of political parties would be tied to the percentage of women candidates selected to contest elections. Mr. Phil Hogan, Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, introduced a draft bill to this effect in December 2011. Hogan was widely acclaimed as a key strategist behind Fine Gael's electoral success at the 2011 general election garnering much respect amongst his party and legislative colleagues. This is important to note as [Gregory Schmidt](#) observes that calls for the introduction of gender quotas rarely gain traction until at least one well-placed male *elite supports* their adoption and pressures his party, or parliamentary colleagues, to approve them. While there were some dissenting voices on the issue, the parliamentary debate on candidate sex quotas was remarkable for [its near unanimous support](#) of the measure. The bill was enacted in July 2012 with the support of all political parties. The incentive to deliver on political reform promises, and thus the adoption of legislative candidate sex quotas, can be assessed as a strategic one. The government will have to stand on its record in office at the next general election. With the country still in the grip of recession, deliverance on political reform can be used by the governing parties to show that (at least some) election promises were kept.

Challenges lie ahead for the implementation of quotas

Effective implementation of candidate sex quotas is crucial for their long-term impact on women's political representation. Challenges lie ahead for the implementation of quotas in Ireland. Legislated quotas are more frequently used in PR List electoral systems where it is easier to combine quotas with lists of party candidates due to higher district magnitudes and more candidates per party in each constituency. If the UK were to introduce a quota system for the House of Commons these challenges may be particularly acute, given the First Past The Post electoral system it operates.

Ireland will be the first country worldwide to introduce gender quotas in a PR-Single Transferable Vote electoral system, and one with comparatively low district and party magnitudes. This, together with the strong decentralised candidate selection systems operated by parties, and the decrease in the number of parliamentarians from 166 to 158, will lead to increased competition at candidate selection conventions at the next general election. This will create a more challenging environment for the implementation of candidate sex quotas. While all party HQs have backed quotas, resistance still remains in all parties, particularly at local levels. Strong political leadership will be required if parties are to meet their obligations under the new Act. It will take at least one, if not two, elections before the full impact of the gender quota provisions are fully understood.

Information for this post is drawn from Buckley, F. (2013) '[Women and Politics in the Republic of Ireland: The Road to Sex Quotas](#)', *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 341-359

Note: This post represents the views of the author, and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting. Shortlink for this post: <http://buff.ly/18aWavv>

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