

The 2016 Irish election demonstrated how gender quotas can shift the balance on female representation

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*The 2016 general election in Ireland was the first where legal gender quotas for candidate selection applied, with the election producing a 40 per cent increase in the number of female parliamentarians (TDs) elected. **Fiona Buckley** assesses how Ireland has implemented gender quotas and their impact on women's candidacy and electoral success in the 2016 election.*



In July 2012 the Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann, passed the *Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act*. The act includes a candidate selection provision which incentivises political parties to select at least 30 per cent female candidates and at least 30 per cent male candidates. If not, political parties surrender 50 per cent of the state funding they receive to run their operations. The threshold will increase to 40 per cent from 2023 onwards.

The act was adopted in response to Ireland's poor record on women's political representation. Up to and including the 2011 general election, the proportion of women in Dáil Éireann never exceeded 16 per cent. This was despite significant socio-cultural change over the past thirty years and the presence of a proportional electoral system, factors usually associated with facilitating women's representation.

The introduction of gender quotas for the 2016 general election saw a significant improvement on the low levels of female candidacy associated with previous electoral contests. A total of 551 candidates contested the election – 388 men (70.4 per cent) and 163 women (29.6 per cent). This was the highest number and proportion of women to ever contest a general election in Ireland and represented a 90 per cent increase on the number of female candidates who contested the previous general election in 2011.

Despite reservations about where they would 'find' female candidates, a review of candidacy rates across the political parties show that all parties surpassed the 30 per cent threshold, as shown in the table below. Left-leaning parties were more likely to run higher proportions of female candidates than those on the centre right. The number and proportion of women standing as independent candidates also increased, suggesting that the discourse surrounding gender quotas and women in politics may have had a diffusion effect, encouraging women outside of party politics to put themselves forward as independents.

Table: Women's candidacy in the 2011 and 2016 general elections

	2011 election		2016 election		Change (%)
	Total candidates	Female candidates	Total candidates	Female candidates	
Fianna Fáil	75	11 (14.7%)	71	22 (31.0%)	+16.3
Fine Gael	104	16 (15.4%)	88	27 (30.7%)	+15.3
Labour	68	18 (26.5%)	36	13 (36.1%)	+9.6
Sinn Féin	41	8 (19.5%)	50	18 (36.0%)	+16.5
Greens	43	8 (18.6%)	40	14 (35.0%)	+16.4
ULA / AAA-PBP	20	5 (25.0%)	31	13 (42.0%)	-
Renua	-	-	26	8 (30.8%)	-
Social Democrats	-	-	14	6 (42.9%)	-
Independents	197	19 (9.6%)	165	33 (20.0%)	+10.4
Others	17	1 (5.9%)	30	9 (30.0%)	+24.1
Total	566	86 (15.2%)	551	163(29.6%)	+14.4

Note: For more information on the parties see: [Fianna Fáil](#); [Fine Gael](#); [Labour Party](#); [Sinn Féin](#); [Green Party](#); [Anti-Austerity Alliance–People Before Profit \(AAA-PBP\)](#); [Renua Ireland](#); [Social Democrats](#).

However, the implementation of gender quotas was not without controversy. Due to the decentralised nature of candidate selection in Ireland, tensions emerged between central party headquarters and the constituency level party over the implementation of gender directives. Tensions of this nature are not new in Irish elections. Party headquarters and constituency level parties are regularly at odds over informal candidate selection requirements such as the geographical spread of candidates and the number of candidates to be selected. But what the formal gender provision exposed is the masculinised nature of the concept of local party democracy.

As [Elin Bjarnagard](#) and [Meryl Kenny](#) have previously demonstrated, decentralised selection processes tend to favour well networked and resourced candidates, which are usually men. The application of gender quotas saw tensions emerge between the 'favoured local son' and the so-called 'quota' woman. In the Longford-Westmeath constituency, members of the Fianna Fáil party threatened to veto the selected female candidate. In Dublin Central, a male member of the Fianna Fáil party took a High Court constitutional challenge against gender quotas. The case was dismissed as it was deemed the plaintiff did not have *locus standi* but demonstrated the tensions that emerged

as a result of the implementation of gender quotas.

A review of the candidate selection conventions across the four main political parties of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and Labour shows that out of a total of 155 selection conventions of which 54 were contested, just eleven gender directives were issued. In addition, 20 women were added-on by party headquarters (as were 14 men). Thus, the majority of female party candidates came through convention without the use of a gender directive. The main achievement of gender quotas was that it instilled a cultural change within political parties whereby political parties embraced gendered recruitment processes, encouraging and equipping women to put themselves forward for election.

Masculinised cultural legacies, both internal and external to political parties, resulted in claims that 'unqualified' and 'unmeritorious' women were being selected by political parties to fill the quota and avoid the financial consequences associated with non-compliance. However male [meritocracy](#) and experience were rarely questioned.

What exactly 'meritocracy' means in terms of the selection of Dáil candidates is yet to be answered, and may mean something different to party members, party leaders and voters. If merit is measured solely by electoral experience, then research that I have conducted on female candidates with [Claire McGing](#) dispels the myth that quotas resulted in the selection of 'unqualified' women. The vast majority of female candidates, like their male counterparts, served extensive political apprenticeships.

In total, 88, or 54 per cent, of women candidates held seats at national and/or local level at some point in their careers, and 84 (52 per cent) of the candidates were current office-holders at the time of the election: 25 were TDs, ten were senators and 49 were councillors. Looking at the larger parties, 85 per cent of Fine Gael's female candidates were electorally-experienced, 82 per cent in Fianna Fáil, 78 per cent in Sinn Féin and 100 per cent in Labour.

All but one of the women selected through a gender directive was a current office-holder. The woman who was not was a former councillor and Dáil and European candidate. Of the 20 women added to the ticket by party headquarters, 14 (70 per cent) had prior electoral experience: 11 current councillors, two former councillors and another who narrowly missed out on a seat in the 2014 local elections.

The results of the election show that a total of 35 women were elected, 16 incumbents and 19 new female TDs. This represents a 40 per cent increase on the number of women TDs elected in 2011, and 22 per cent of Dáil Éireann now consists of women, the highest proportion of women deputies in the history of the state. Women make up 13.6 per cent of Fianna Fáil TDs, 21.7 per cent of independent TDs, 22 per cent of Fine Gael TDs, 26.1 per cent of Sinn Féin TDs, 28.6 per cent of Labour party TDs, 33.3 per cent of AAA-PBP TDs, 50 per cent of Green party TDs and 66.6 per cent of Social Democrats TDs. Overall, women candidates won almost 25 per cent of the first preference votes in the election, compared with 16 per cent in 2011.

However, some female candidates reported that where they ran on a dual ticket with a male party colleague, the local party organisation largely concentrated its resources and efforts around the male candidate. These reports suggest that informal masculinised legacies within political parties remain, posing a challenge to the effectiveness of gender quotas. This is indicative of continuing resistance to affirmative action. It is likely to take a few electoral cycles before the gender quota is fully imbedded into the political system and this resistance is diluted.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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