

Analysis of the women selected and elected by quota in Ireland dispel the myth that they were under-qualified

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The introduction of legal gender quotas for the 2016 general election in Ireland resulted in a marked improvement in the number of women candidates selected and TDs (parliamentarian) elected. However, questions of merit and qualifications were continually raised about women candidates throughout the campaign. In this blog **Fiona Buckley** and **Claire McGing** assess the political experience of women candidates and dispel the myth that women candidates were unqualified or unmerited candidates.*



Credit: [Tommy Kavanagh, CC BY SA 3.0](#)

In 2012 the Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann, passed the *Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act*. This act incentivises political parties to select at least 30 per cent female candidates and at least 30 per cent male candidates or else surrender 50 per cent of the state funding they receive to run their operations. The threshold will rise to 40 per cent from 2023 onwards. Gender quotas apply at the national level only.

A total of 551 candidates contested the 2016 general election – 388 men (70.4 per cent) and 163 women (29.6 per cent). This is the highest number and proportion of women to ever contest a general election in Ireland and represents a 90 per cent increase on the number of women who contested the 2011 general election. Following the election, there are 35 women TDs in Dáil Éireann, a 40 per cent increase on the number of women elected in 2011. Women's representation in Dáil Éireann now stands at 22 per cent, a record high.

However, the implementation of gender quotas resulted in claims from some detractors that 'unqualified' and 'unmeritorious' women were being selected by political parties to fill the quota and avoid the financial consequences associated with non-compliance. The adoption of gender quotas generated a debate on the requisite and desired attributes of political candidates, which is a good development, but much of the focus was on women candidates' political qualifications, skills and meritocracy. 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, our research on women candidates dispels the myth that quotas have resulted in the selection of 'unqualified'

women (for more on merit and equality, see [Rainbow Murray](#)).

88, or 54 per cent, of women candidates held seats at national and/or local level at some point in their careers. Of these, 84 (52 per cent of all women candidates) were current office-holders: 25 TDs, ten senators and 49 councillors. The corresponding proportion of male candidates who were officeholders at the time of the election was 61 per cent.

If we include women who ran unsuccessfully for office prior to the 2016 general election, the figure for prior female electoral experience rises to 117 (72 per cent). Looking at the larger parties, 85 per cent of Fine Gael women candidates were electorally-experienced, 82 per cent in Fianna Fáil, 78 per cent in Sinn Féin and 100 per cent in Labour.

Women selected at party conventions where gender directives were employed, as well as those added to tickets by national executives, were particularly vulnerable to accusations of being 'unmerited' candidates. Again, our research disputes these claims.

Eleven gender directives were issued by party headquarters instructing selectors at the local level to select women. The majority of these women were current officer-holders, usually a sitting councillor. Those who were not were previous office-holders, again, usually a councillor in a local authority.

In total, 20 women (and 14 men) were added to the ticket by party headquarters – nine by Fianna Fáil, nine by Fine Gael and two by Sinn Féin. Of the 20 women candidates added on, 14 (70 per cent) had prior electoral experience: 11 were councillors, two were former councillors and another narrowly missed out on a seat in the 2014 local elections. Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin women in this category were more experienced than their Fine Gael counterparts.

Of the 35 women TDs elected, all bar one had previous office-holding experience: 16 were incumbent TDs, 2 were senators in the outgoing Seanad and 16 held council seats prior to their election as a TD.

The data on women's previous political experience illustrates that the majority of women selected and elected at the 2016 general election were quality candidates dispelling the myth that they were unmerited contenders for office. Rather than skip a few rungs of the political ladder, the vast majority of women party candidates, like their male counterparts, served extensive political apprenticeships prior to the 2016 general election.

The majority of women elected at this election (83 per cent) were councillors at some stage in their political careers. The data confirms the importance of local government experience in the political career development of women politicians in Ireland (for more on this see this article '[Is Local Office a Springboard for Women to Dáil Éireann?](#)'). Given the importance of local government experience to electoral success in Dáil elections, it is imperative that the gender quota is extended to local government elections. The recruitment and development of women politicians at the local level is essential if more are to be encouraged to run for national office.

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