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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Reflecting on Legislative Gender Quotas in Ireland

Fiona Buckley

Department of Government and Politics, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland
Email: f.buckley@ucc.ie

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Three days before the Irish general election in November 2024, Ireland lost one of its foremost and trailblazing women of the 20th century: Gemma Hussey. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Hussey served as a Senator, Teachta Dála (TD, a member of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of parliament in Ireland), and Cabinet Minister, and before and after her time in Irish politics, she remained a steadfast campaigner for progressive women's rights, oftentimes in the face of staunch opposition from the Catholic Church, party colleagues, and the public. She was also a strong advocate of measures to support, facilitate, and promote women in politics.

I first met Hussey in September 2010, when I and a colleague, Dr. Sandra McAvoy, invited her to address a conference that we had organized in University College Cork, examining the underrepresentation of women in Irish politics. At that point in time, less than 100 women had ever been elected to Dáil Éireann and just 11 women had been appointed cabinet minister. At that conference, Hussey recounted her time as a member of the Women's Political Association (WPA), established in the early 1970s to promote women's involvement in public life, and detailed its activities and successes. However, she acknowledged that progress had stagnated. Picking up on what she described as "a sparkling anger" in the room, she contended that the time for "tea and sympathy" was over and called on conference attendees to mobilize for change.

The room responded to this rallying call and the 5050 Group was born. A grassroots initiative, the group brought together practitioners, members of the public, businesspeople, and academics to promote awareness about the underrepresentation of women in Irish politics and its consequences, as well as to campaign and advocate for the adoption of legislative measures to guarantee women's presence on the ballot paper. It was my first time involved in academic activism and for close on two years, I and colleagues held public meetings, ran a social media campaign, contributed to media discussions, wrote op-eds, met with

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policymakers and politicians, and addressed party meetings and conferences. We argued that it was time to move away from questioning "what is wrong with women" to one which queried "what is wrong with the system" and highlighted the structural, institutional, and organizational barriers to women's involvement in politics.

Our efforts, combined with a confluence of other factors (see Buckley 2013; Buckley and Galligan 2019), culminated in the passage of legislation in July 2012 introducing a gender quota for candidate selection. Political parties would now be required by law to select a certain proportion of women or else risk losing half of their state funding. Since the implementation of the legislative gender quota, there has been a 186% increase in the number of women contesting general elections and a 76% increase in the number of women elected. However, following the November 2024 general election, three out of every four TDs is still a man. Thus, gender parity in descriptive representation is far from being achieved and patience is beginning to wear thin at the slow rate of progress (for example, see O'Connor 2025).

It feels like stagnation is setting in again. Yet, as academic research tells us, parties are gatekeepers to candidate selection and party behavior is integral to the effectiveness of gender quotas (Krook 2009; 2016). In this Note from the Field, I highlight that the candidate selection practices of some political parties enable them to meet their obligations under the law, while simultaneously perpetuating and protecting men's candidacies. However, a renewed "sparkling anger" is now being channeled into a campaign to protect and extend the gender quota in an effort to enhance its effectiveness.

Why a Legislative Gender Quota for Ireland?

The descriptive representation of women in Irish politics is low. Whether it is in local government (27%), in the Dáil (25%), or at the cabinet table (20%), women are significantly outnumbered by men.[1] A legislative gender quota was adopted in Ireland in 2012 to address the abysmally low numbers of women being selected by political parties to contest election. By way of example, across the six general elections from 1989 to 2011, women's candidacy averaged just 17.2%. This was at a time when women's party membership steadily increased to approximately one-third of all party members.

Studies examining the electoral performance of women showed little if any voter bias against female candidates (Galligan 2008; Galligan, Laver, and Carney 1999; McElroy and Marsh 2010; McGing and White 2012), while at the 2011 general election, women and men enjoyed approximately the same success rates — 29.1% of women who contested election got elected in comparison to 29.2% of men (Buckley and McGing 2011). Taking all of this evidence into account, attention turned to political parties and their efforts to promote and support women's candidacy. Candidate selection in Irish political parties is best described as a hybrid of "local selection, but with national approval" (Weeks 2008, 49). At times, this relationship becomes quite fractious, as a battle for control ensues between the preferences of the party's membership at constituency level and the candidate strategy as delineated by the party's Head Office.

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A feminist institutionalist study of candidate selection processes in Ireland observes that, as the formal rules of candidate selection treat all candidates equally, women's political underrepresentation has tended to be framed as "an unfortunate consequence of a gender-neutral, fair, and effective system, which produces the best people for the job... arguments which fail to take into account the 'informal rules of the game' that bestow significant advantage to specific actors" (Culhane 2017, 48). These informal norms of candidate selection include incumbency, localism, and personalism.

If an incumbent TD wishes to contest election again, it is rare that this does not occur. Because fewer women than men enjoy incumbency status, they also lose out on its ancillary benefits, specifically name recognition, a record of public service, and fundraising abilities, all of which are crucial for candidate selection and election. In 2024, only 12.2% of 246 female candidates were incumbents in comparison to 21.5% of 441 male candidates. Just under 80% of incumbents were reelected, pointing to the electoral advantage, both at selection and election stages, of being an incumbent TD.

The small-scale nature of society in Ireland (with a population size of approximately 5.1 million) means localism and personalism are strong features of its political culture. As men outnumber women 2.7-to-1 in local government, more men than women can draw on their elected local office experience when it comes to party selection processes and elections. Furthermore, election after election, choosing a candidate to look after the local needs of the constituency registers highly among the reasons provided by voters for determining their electoral preferences. Delivering for people "on the ground" is also integral for electoral success, whether a person is a sitting TD, a local councilor, or an aspirant hopeful of getting selected by a party to contest a future election. This necessitates a lot of time working in the community, developing a local profile and network, and gaining a reputation for "getting things done."

Candidate centric electoral systems, such as Ireland's proportional representation single transferable vote (PR-STV) system, also require candidates to cultivate personal votes. Comparative research shows that these dynamics are disadvantageous to women's political representation (Thames and Williams 2010). Indeed, given that women continue to provide "more unpaid hours as carers to friends or family than men" (Central Statistics Office 2024), women simply do not have the same access to discretionary time to mount such a campaign. Furthermore, many women balance their care responsibilities by working part-time in paid employment, contributing to the 9.3% gender pay gap, not an insignificant factor when the average personal spend by candidates on their election campaigns is just under €11,000 (Buckley and Gregory 2019, 67). It is little wonder then that men outnumber women at all levels of the political system in Ireland.

Integrating the Gender Quota into Candidate Selection Procedures

The legislative gender quota has been applied in three general elections in Ireland held in February 2016, February 2020, and November 2024. Part 6, Section 42 of the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 specified that

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the gender quota threshold was 30% for a maximum of seven years following its first application, increasing to 40% thereafter. Thus, the November 2024 general election was the first using the higher threshold.

Implementation of the law has translated into a 10.2 percentage point increase in the proportion of seats held by women in Dáil Éireann, from 15.1% in 2011, the last election without a gender quota, to 25.3% in 2024. The quota has thus hastened the pace of progress: what the quota achieved in nearly 14 years and across three electoral cycles had previously taken 29 years and eight electoral cycles (see Table 1). Given that Ireland was coming from a such a low base for women's political representation, however, the change feels incremental. Furthermore, after an initial strong bounce between the 2011 and 2016 general elections, that pace of change shows signs of slowing down.

A review of women's candidacies across the political parties shows that there is strong compliance with the gender quota law (see Table 2). This is not surprising given that parties who are in breach of the law lose 50% of the component of state funding that goes toward their running costs. As state funding now accounts for almost 90% of parties' total income, political parties are heavily dependent on the state for survival (Weeks 2023, 149). In light of this sanction, there is a strong incentive for parties to comply with the gender quota. In general, newer parties and those of the left tend to select higher proportions of

Table 1. The share of women in Dáil Éireann

	Deputies		
Election	Total	Women	%
1977	148	6	4.1
1981	166	11	6.6
1982 (Feb)	166	8	4.8
1982 (Nov)	166	14	8.4
1987	166	14	8.4
1989	166	13	7.8
1992	166	20	12
1997	166	20	12
2002	166	22	13.3
2007	166	22	13.3
2011	166	25	15.1
2016	158	35	22.1
2020	160	36	22.5
2024	174	44	25.3

Source: Author's own calculations.

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Table 2. Proportion of women candidates selected by political party

Political party	2016 30% LGQ	2020 30% LGQ	2024 40% LGQ
Fianna Fáil	31	31	41
Fine Gael	30.7	30.5	41
Greens	35	41	53
Labour	36.1	32.3	41
Sinn Féin	36	33.3	42
People Before Profit-Solidarity	42	43	45
Social Democrats	42.9	55	46
Aontú	-	34.6	51
Independent Ireland	-	-	43
Others	30	7.4	7.3
Independents	20	19.2	17.5

Source: Author's own calculations.

women to run than the long-established and center-right political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

The growing fragmentation of the Irish party system has seen the combined support for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael fall below 50% in recent elections, down from 85% in the early 1980s. Yet, in relative terms, both parties are still strong vote-getters and run the most candidates of all parties. A review of candidate selection practices of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael since the implementation of the gender quota law show that there is a heavy reliance on the "add-on" route to bolster female candidacy numbers, with a much higher proportion of women than men being selected via this mechanism (see Table 3). Candidates are added-on by a party's national constituency committee following the completion of constituency-level selection conventions. While traditionally (and still) used to ensure a good geographical spread of party candidates in a constituency, this add-on mechanism is increasingly used to "balance the ticket" and ensure compliance with the provisions of the legislative gender quota.

Dependency on the add-on route was at its lowest in 2024. This indicates that as more women get selected and elected since the implementation of the legislative gender quota, they are acquiring the attributes of incumbency, localism, and personalism — the informal norms that continue to remain integral for candidate selection in Ireland. However, the reality remains that more men than women benefit from the continued privileging of these informal norms in candidate selection. The formal gender quota has not dislodged these dynamics but rather operates alongside them.

Further, the add-on route appears to have become the preferred strategy of both parties to buttress women's candidacies, following a number of candidate

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Table 3. Added-on candidates, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael

	Fianna Fáil		Fine Gael	
Election	% of Women candidates who were add-ons	% of Men candidates who were add-ons	% of Women candidates who were add-ons	% of Men candidates who were add-ons
2016	40.9	14.3	33.3	9.8
2020	58	21	44	18
2024	38.2	12.2	24.2	10.6

Source: Author's own. Data compiled from analysis of Adrian Kavanagh's Candidate Selection Blog — https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2024/07/10/candidates-for-the-2024-2025-general-election-by-dail-constituency/.
Note: This table is reproduced in an article, co-written by the author - Buckley, Fiona and Yvonne Galligan. 2025. "The 2024 General Election – a gender analysis." *Irish Political Studies* - DOI - 10.1080/07907184.2025.2543083.

selection controversies ahead of the 2016 general election, when party members in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael pushed back at the implementation of the gender quota at some candidate selection conventions (see Brennan and Buckley 2017; Buckley, Galligan, and McGing 2017). Added-on candidates can be announced quite late in the election campaign, leaving the candidate very little time to run an effective campaign. Furthermore, they tend to be added to constituencies where the party has already selected a high-profile candidate, who is oftentimes a male incumbent.

These nomination patterns matter significantly in light of the design of the PR-STV electoral system, where each voter casts their vote in the form of a ranked ballot. When voters rank candidates, their vote may be transferred to their alternative preferences if their preferred candidate is eliminated or elected with surplus votes. The "add-on" mechanism serves to shore up party votes, so that when candidates with fewer votes are eliminated, those votes are transferred to the lead party candidate (usually a man) who then wins the seat. In other words, the add-on route is a mechanism that enables a party to both "meet the quota" while perpetuating men's dominance in politics. Illustrating this dynamic, Fianna Fáil won 48 seats, the most of any party, in the 2024 General Election, but just seven (14.6%) of these seats are held by women. Similarly, only 10 of Fine Gael's 38 TDs are women (26.3%).

Conclusion: Extending the Gender Quota

Gender inequality in political representation became the key political issue of the day when the new government was announced in January 2025. Of 15 cabinet ministers in the coalition government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Independents, just three are women, down from four in the outgoing government. Of the 23 Ministers of State, just six are women. With just nine of 38 (23.7%) ministerial portfolios assigned to women, Ireland falls well below the Europe and North America average of 31.4% (UN Women 2025).

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When challenged about this, Fianna Fáil TD Niall Collins, who retained his ministerial position, contended that "at the end of the day, the people of Ireland decide who their individual TDs and public representatives are going to be."[2] Despite this attempt to exonerate political parties for the continued underrepresentation of women in Irish politics, it is vital to stress that political parties make choices about candidate selection strategy, where and when candidates are selected to run, and the level of support offered to candidates.[3] These choices are integral to candidate performance, as well as to determining the effectiveness of gender quotas.

The legislative gender quota is working, as evidenced in the increased numbers of women getting elected. Some parties have surpassed the so-called 30% critical mass for women TDs, including at this most recent election Sinn Féin (38.5%), the Social Democrats (36.4%), and People Before Profit-Solidarity (33.3%). But some candidate selection practices serve instead to undermine the effectiveness of the gender quota. Furthermore, when the quota does not apply, for example at local elections, some political parties struggle to meet their own informal targets for women's candidacy. Fianna Fáil has never exceeded 25% women's candidacy at local elections, while Fine Gael has never selected more than 29% women candidates. Given the continuing prominence of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in Irish politics and the importance of local office experience in the political career pipeline, these figures are of concern to advocates for gender equality in political life.

In response, a campaign is now mobilizing to advocate for an extension of the legislative gender quota to all elections, not just general elections. Convened by the National Women's Council, the Alliance for Gender Quotas for Local Elections[4] is a collective of civil society organizations and academics (including this author), working together to advocate for the provision of statutory gender quotas at local elections. It supports the recommendations of The Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality (2021)[5] which also requested the extension of gender quotas to all elections. The Alliance calls, further, for mechanisms to ensure enhanced diversity and inclusion in political representation. While it is too early to assess the impact of this campaign, without continued focus on women's political representation in Ireland, it may not only stagnate, as Gemma Hussey worried, but existing gains may also be reversed.

Notes

1. The situation is better in Seanad Éireann, the Irish upper house (45%), and at the European Parliament level where 43% of the Irish delegation are women, although elections to these institutions, as well as local elections, are considered second-order elections.

2. https://www.rte.ie/news/analysis-and-comment/2025/0130/1493722-women-politics/ (accessed January 31, 2025).

3. For example, my research with Mack Mariani finds that well-funded candidates do well at elections in Ireland. In 2016, in response to the gender quota, political parties directed increased party finances to aid women's candidacy. However, in 2020, almost all additional funding went to male candidates (see Buckley and Mariani 2023; 2024). At time of writing, election finance data for the 2024 general election has yet to be released.

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4. https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/FINAL_Formatted_Gender_Quotas_Position_Paper.pdf#:~:text=Convened%20by%20the%20National%20Women%E2%80%99s%20Council%2C%20the%20Alliance,statutory%20gender%20quotas%20of%2040%25%20for%20local%20elections (accessed January 31, 2025)
5. https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf (accessed January 31, 2025).

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Fiona Buckley is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government and Politics, University College Cork, Ireland: f.buckley@ucc.ie

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