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The 2020 General Election: A Gender Analysis

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Introduction

When the 33rd Dáil met for the first time on Thursday 20 February 2020, 36 female TDs took their seats. This is the highest number of women to be elected at a general election in Ireland, but an increase of only one since the 2016 election. The proportion of women in the Dáil now stands at 22.5 per cent, a record high. However, gender parity is still a long way off. Why this is so and what measures could help address this fundamental democratic deficit are discussed in this report.

The 2020 general election held mixed fortunes for women candidates. On the one hand it was a very successful day for female party leaders Mary Lou McDonald (Sinn Féin), Catherine Murphy and Róisín Shortall (Social Democrats co-leaders) as they saw their parties' Dáil representation increase in size. Furthermore, sixteen new women TDs were elected. However, these advances were counteracted by the loss of a number of prominent women from Dáil Éireann.

It was a bad day for long-standing TDs and former cabinet ministers Joan Burton and Jan O'Sullivan. Their departure from the Dáil leaves the Labour party with an all-male team of deputies. High profile casualties also included cabinet ministers Regina Doherty (Fine Gael), Katherine Zappone (Independent) and ministers of state Catherine Byrne (Fine Gael) and Mary Mitchell-O'Connor (Fine Gael). Other prominent losses included Fianna Fáil's Lisa Chambers, Margaret Murphy-O'Mahony and Fiona O'Loughlin; Fine Gael's Marcella Corcoran-Kennedy and Kate O'Connell; and Solidarity's Ruth Coppinger.

Of the 138 incumbent TDs who sought re-election, 19 of the 31 (61.3 per cent) women and 84 of the 107 (78.5 per cent) men were successful in their efforts. Outgoing incumbent men were more likely to get re-elected than women. It begs the question why?

Explaining the halt to women's political advancement

Previous elections have shown that when there is a swing against a political party in the popular vote, the party's female TDs are disproportionately impacted, as there are so few women candidates running in an election. This occurred in 1997 to Labour's women; in 2002 to Fine Gael's women; and in 2011 to Fianna Fáil's women candidates. All three parties saw a decrease in their first preference vote in 2020 which may offer some explanation for the loss of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Labour women.

Initial analysis of the dynamics at play in the 2020 general election finds that 15 of the incumbent women contested the election alongside a party incumbent and/or running mate. Thirteen of the running mates were men while four were women (Table 1). Seven of these 15 female incumbents were unsuccessful. In three of these cases (Dublin Bay South, Laois-Offaly, Mayo) the female incumbent lost out to a male running mate who was an incumbent with a longer Dáil career. In Cork South West, the winning male running mate was a newcomer but from an established political family. In Meath East, Helen McEntee retained her seat while Regina Doherty lost. Both were high

profile ministers in the outgoing government and while Doherty had been a TD since 2011, McEntee hails from a well-known political and sporting family. In a sixth case (Dún Laoghaire), the female incumbent lost to her newcomer woman running mate while in the seventh case (Kildare South), neither the female incumbent nor running mate were successful but the party, Fianna Fáil, maintained its representation in the constituency due to the automatic re-election of the Ceann Comhairle Seán Ó Feargháil.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Twenty-three male incumbents also lost seats, 15 in circumstances where a party running mate was successful. In four of these cases, the running mate was a newcomer - Jennifer Murnane O'Connor (Fianna Fáil), Norma Foley (Fianna Fáil), Cathal Crowe (Fianna Fáil) and James O'Connor (Fianna Fáil). Overall, 35 incumbents lost seats, 12 women and 23 men. The initial analysis uncovers few consistent patterns to explain these losses and no doubt constituency boundary changes also played a part. However 28 of the 35 losses were from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael incumbents, and what is certain is that both parties lost seats as their vote contracted in the face of increasing support for Sinn Féin. Vote management strategies were also queried. In a critique of Fianna Fáil headquarters (HQ), the defeated outgoing Fianna Fáil TD for Cork East, Kevin O'Keeffe, was reported as saying "I would say that my running mate [James O'Connor] got far more attention, with Micheál Martin, Michael McGrath and Jim O'Callaghan joining him on the campaign trail. I did not get that kind of support from senior party figures. In that respect party HQ could have been a lot more balanced with its strategy" (Browne, 2020).

Another reason for the halt to women's parliamentary gains could be the stagnation of women's candidacies since 2016. A total of 162 women contested the election, one fewer than in 2016. Reviewing female candidacy rates across the parties reveals they varied from a low of 30.5 per cent for Fine Gael to a high of 55 per cent for the Social Democrats (Table 2). It would seem, as Ciairín de Buis, CEO of Women for Election suggests, some parties view the 30 per cent gender quota threshold as a target rather than a minimum requirement. Overall, newer political parties and those of a leftist hue were more likely to select women candidates in higher proportions than parties on the centre-right and long-established parties.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Alongside the 162 women who contested the election were 357 men, although independents Peter Casey and Sean O'Leary contested in multiple constituencies increasing the number of male candidacies to a total of 368. Of the 162 women who ran, just over one-fifth (22.2 per cent) were successful in their election attempts. Of the 357 men, just over one-third (34.5 per cent) were elected. Table 3 shows the candidate success rates of women and men disaggregated by party. It reveals that male candidates in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and the Green Party were significantly more likely to be elected than their female counterparts.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

These success rates raise questions about party strategy and intra-party dynamics surrounding candidate selection and party supports to female candidates. Were men more likely than women to be selected to contest targeted and winnable seats? Were women candidates more likely than men to be positioned as marginal or sweeper candidates, amassing a good vote only for it to be transferred to a winning male party colleague on elimination? On multiple-candidate tickets where parties ran at least two candidates in a constituency, what resources and campaign supports were available to candidates and how were these distributed among them?

There is evidence from other countries that political parties nominate women to run in ‘hopeless districts’ (Gertzog & Simard, 1981; Deber, 1982; Thomas & Bodet, 2013; Jones, 1998); pit inexperienced women against entrenched male incumbents (Gertzog & Simard, 1981; Burrell, 1988); and place female candidates in less favourable positions on electoral ballots and party lists (Dahlerup, 2007; Esteve-Volart & Bagues, 2012; Maciej & Kukulowicz, 2014). Research of the 2016 general election reveals that female non-incumbents nominated by Fine Gael were significantly less experienced than their counterparts in previous elections and female non-incumbents nominated by both Fine Gael and Labour were significantly more likely to run non-competitive races, even after controlling for party, experience, funding support and other factors (Mariani et al; 2019).

Table 4 shows the overall breakdown of Dáil seats disaggregated by party and gender. Labour is now a single-sex party, as are the micro-parties of Aontú and Independents4Change (I4C). The Social Democrats (66.7 per cent) has the highest proportion of women TDs, followed at some distance by Sinn Féin (35.1 per cent) and the Independents group (21.1 per cent).

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Much has been made of the success of the Social Democrats in attracting, mobilising and running women candidates. As noted earlier, 55 per cent of their candidates were women. Factors such as providing free childcare at party events, adopting a discursive approach to policy formulation and the presence of female leaders have done much to create a welcoming environment for women. Coupled to this is the fact that the party is new and free of institutionalised legacies of male incumbency and male over-representation, a factor previously observed in the case of the Progressive Democrats (Galligan 1998, p.165).

A talking point of the election was that a woman ran in all 39 constituencies, but it is an indicator of the slow pace of change in Irish politics that it took until 2020 for this to happen. While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael registered the highest numbers of women candidates, their proportion of women candidates was lower than that of many other parties, and they fielded all-male tickets in a significant number of constituencies (see Table 5). While not exceptional in this regard, given they were the largest parties in terms of candidacy numbers, it would have been expected that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would have selected women to contest in more constituencies.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

As the election counts unfolded, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael faced criticism for over-selecting candidates. An analysis of publicly available data on candidate selection shows that close to a third (32 per cent) of Fianna Fáil’s candidates and a quarter of Fine Gael’s candidates (26 per cent) were added onto party tickets after the completion of selection conventions¹. Candidate additions happen for various reasons but mostly to ensure geographical and gender balance. Late-addition candidates are hampered by having a limited amount of time to run an effective campaign.

A deeper analysis of the gender profile of add-on candidates reveals that some 58 per cent of Fianna Fáil’s female candidates were added to the ticket post selection convention in comparison to 21 per cent of their male candidates. The respective figures for Fine Gael are 44 per cent of female candidates and 18 per cent of male candidates. It would seem that both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael

¹ Data on add-on candidates was sourced from the Candidate Selection Database compiled by Dr Adrian Kavanagh, Maynooth University - <https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2017/04/19/candidates-for-the-next-2017-2021-general-election-by-constituency/>.

rely on the 'add-on' route to shore-up their numbers of women candidates. Yet the data² shows 23 women lost out at party selection conventions. Thus, to suggest that women don't put themselves forward for selection would be misleading. Rather, as research from the National Women's Council of Ireland (2019, p. 16) argues, candidate selection processes can be guided by "conscious and unconscious forms of gender bias embedded in ideas about what makes the ideal candidate and these have historically privileged stereotypically male traits".

Male dominance persists in Irish politics

The continuing male dominance of politics bolsters the male-gendered environment and image of political institutions. Given that masculinity is the premise on which politics is constructed and the "norm" against which all political activity is judged (Connolly, 2013; Duerst-Lahti & Kelly, 1995; Harmer et al; 2017), women entering politics are contrasted against the "naturalised" male inhabitants (Puwar, 2004) which influences party selectorates' support for women's candidacy. Concurrently this has the effect of depressing the move of women into politics, curtailing role-model effects, and inhibiting women's confidence and ambition to pursue a political career (Bjarnegard, 2013; Buckley et al; 2015).

Indeed, some of the stark realities of being a woman in politics were laid bare in an RTÉ Radio 1 'Sunday with Miriam' programme, when women who lost their seats in the general election recounted their experiences of online abuse and misogyny.³ Former Fianna Fáil TD Lisa Chambers outlined:

All politicians get abuse but I do think there is a different level for female politicians, it's a lot more personalised, it's a lot more based on the tone of your voice, the colour of your hair, how you're dressed. I'm pregnant currently so that was coming up a little bit as well, 'oh, she's taking maternity leave, no point in electing her', so there is an extra level.

To minimise such incidents as simply the 'cut and thrust' of politics has, what Krook (2017) describes as, "devastating consequences for the quality of democracy". She makes the point that the aim of online abuse "is to silence the targets, leading them to retreat from the public sphere. Young women have certainly internalised these lessons, dampening their own political ambitions". The prevalence of online sexual abuse, threats and comment directed against women in public life is a new barrier to achieving gender equality in politics (O'Reilly 2020).

Women attract voter support

Despite the challenges women in politics encounter, female candidates are receiving more first preference votes than ever before. Figure 1 shows that in the 2020 general election, 584,101 (26.7 per cent) first preference votes were cast for female candidates, up from 15.7 per cent in 2011. Women's share of the vote, then, is ahead of their share of candidacies. This trajectory dispels the assumption that voters don't vote for women. Furthermore, the number of constituencies represented by all-male teams of TDs has declined from 16 in 2016 to 12 in 2020. Mary Lou McDonald became the most successful female party leader in Irish politics, leading her party to win the most first preference votes (24.5 per cent) at the 2020 election. However, her attempts to form a left-leaning coalition government lacked the requisite numbers, and as the developing coronavirus pandemic and ensuing restrictions took hold in March 2020, the momentum on government formation talks shifted towards Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

² Ibid

³ Sunday with Miriam, 16th February 2020 - <https://www.rte.ie/radio1/sunday-with-miriam/#103329983>

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The effect of the candidate gender quota

Women remain under-represented in Irish politics in the present, as in the past.. Reviewing the gender profile of all TDs elected to Dáil Éireann between 1918 and 2020 reminds us of the sheer gender imbalance of the chamber. Of the 1341 people elected in 102 years, just 130 (9.7 per cent) have been women (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Legislative gender quotas for candidate selection at general elections have helped to redress this gender imbalance. At their first roll out at the 2016 general election, there was a 90 per cent increase in women's candidacy and a 40 per cent increase in women elected. Women's representation in Dáil Éireann increased from 15 per cent in 2011 to 22 per cent in 2016. To see a similar seven percentage point increase in a historical view, one needs to track 22 years and five electoral cycles spanning the period 1989 to 2011.

Without doubt the situation for women's political representation in Ireland would be a lot worse without the intervention of gender quotas as women's candidacy in the eleven general elections between 1977 and 2011 averaged just 14 per cent in comparison to 30.5 per cent recorded at the 2020 general election. We also know from local elections that when legislative gender quotas do not apply, some political parties will revert back to their old habit of severely under-selecting women. Just 21 per cent of Fianna Fáil's candidates and 29 per cent of Fine Gael's candidates in the 2019 local elections were women.

Those who argue that gender quotas lead to the nomination of inexperienced candidates selected 'just because they are women', tend to ignore the fact that where inexperience exists, it is a legacy of men's domination of political office. Socio-cultural and socio-structural factors stymied women's access to the public domain for much of the past 102 years since women gained the right to vote and stand in election in 1918. Gender quotas are therefore a mechanism of change. As more women get selected and elected, their level of experience will increase.

The international experience indicates that it takes at least three electoral cycles for gender quotas to bed into the electoral system. In many respects, the 2020 election was a consolidation election before the quota threshold increases to 40 per cent for general elections from 2023 onwards. However, the gender quota law should be seen as the beginning rather than the culmination of a process to encourage and support women's participation in politics.

Improving the context for gender equality in politics

Candidate gender quotas for local elections

Where gender quotas are in place in other countries, they usually apply to elections at multiple levels, not just to national-level elections. Drawing on this experience, serious consideration must be given to extending legislative gender quotas to local government in Ireland. Given that localism is so ingrained in Irish political culture, the route to national political office typically starts at the local level. Local government experience is a significant springboard for politicians wishing to run in Dáil elections. Four-fifths (80.5 per cent) of the 36 women TDs were local councillors at some stage in their political careers. In the May 2019 local elections, all political parties with the exception of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael selected at least 30 per cent women candidates. This election saw the

announcement of a government fund of €500,000 to be shared among political parties who selected a minimum of 30 per cent female candidates or showed a positive trend in that direction. This incentive arrangement could be formalised via law and consideration should be given to increasing the quota threshold and funding available.

Measures elsewhere to ensure the effectiveness of gender quotas include the introduction of placement mandates whereby women candidates are positioned towards the top of candidate lists on ballot papers. In some countries, gender quota laws and/or political parties commit to selecting women to contest winnable seats. The alphabetical listing of candidates on the Irish ballot paper negates the former measure and many would argue that party fragmentation and the vagaries of PR-STV make predicting winnable seats unreliable, thus preventing the latter.

Greater accountability for funding allocations

Given that political parties are in receipt of state funding, and that some of that funding is conditional on their advancement of gender equality, then the way is open for the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO) to require parties be accountable for their gender, inclusivity and diversity profile. Audits of political parties' membership, office-holders and candidacy could form part of this accountability. In 2018, just 3.6 per cent of all party expenditure was allocated to the participation of women. A gendered analysis of party and election donations and expenditure would highlight the gendered distribution of party financial resources.

Introduction of family-friendly policies

Cultural change in politics must also be considered. Currently no maternity or parental leave exists for elected officials in Ireland. In recent years other parliaments worldwide have introduced such leave entitlements. Assemblies such as the House of Commons have also facilitated proxy voting arrangements. The controversy about TDs' voting practices in the Dáil in Autumn 2019 would seem to have discouraged any initiatives of this kind for the time being. However, in March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic forced parliaments worldwide to adapt their working practices to accommodate limited in-person plenaries and facilitate remote access. To implement remote access for the Irish parliament would require a constitutional referendum. Article 15.3 states that "The Houses of the Oireachtas shall sit in or near the City of Dublin or in such other place as they may from time to time determine" (Constitution of Ireland, 1937/2018). Nonetheless, the democratic challenges raised by the 2020 public health crisis may well encourage politicians to review their working practices. The long term consequence of this situation may see benefits for gender equality as parliaments modernise their way of conducting business.

Conclusion

Overall the 2020 general election will be remembered as the change election. While the number of women may not have altered, the disappointment expressed at the stagnant growth in women's political representation is an indicator that the public expect the numbers of women in politics to rise rather than see such advances as exceptions to the rule. Political parties will do well to heed this sentiment. After all, the 2020 general election showed that women candidates are growing in popularity with the voters.

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