#MoreWomen

WOMEN FOR **ELECTION**

Why so few women in the Dáil?

Gendered pathways to parliament and how to advance the selection and election of women TDs

Report researched and written by Claire McGing for Women for Election

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FOREWORD

At the time of publication, March 2024, Ireland is 103rd in world rankings on the number of women in National Parliaments. Only 23% of TDs are women; just one in four of our local Councillors are women.

There have been just 131 women TDs since the foundation of the State. There have been four women Tanáistí, but as yet no women Taoiseach, no women Minister for Finance or a woman Minister for Foreign Affairs.

> **It is vital for the health and sustainability of our democracy that our politics represent the population of the country; that there are #MoreWomen in Irish politics.**

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality, after considering the comprehensive recommendations of the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality, recognised the current situation as an 'unfinished democracy'.

It is vital for the health and sustainability of our democracy that our politics represent the population of the country; that there are #MoreWomen in Irish politics. Achieving 50:50 gender representation, and a diversity within that representation, is an essential task of Government, of political parties and of civil society.

Political Parties, supported with Government funding, have been making significant efforts to encourage and support more women to enter politics, both within party structures and in coming forward for selection for elections, notwithstanding the increasing challenges to attract new candidates generally.

Candidate selection has long been identified as one of the '5 C's' that are the principal barriers to women's entry into politics. This study explores for the first time the 'eye of the needle' of selection processes for the then two largest parties across three general elections and gives a gendered analysis of the outcomes across seven elections for all parties. The study focussed on these two large parties as comprehensive selection data was discoverable.

Our thanks go to Claire McGing for her painstaking research that culminated in this report. It is a significant addition to the body of research that seeks to understand the underrepresentation of women in Irish politics and from which we can draw recommendations to ensure that the status quo is not maintained.

Our thanks to go all the women who had the courage and conviction to go forward for selection; to the women who were selected and ran; and to the women elected. You have paved the way for #MoreWomen in Irish politics.

Brian Sheehan
CEO

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Ireland has been described as an 'unfinished democracy' due to the scarcity of women in politics, especially women from minoritised and marginalised backgrounds.[1]

Figure 1 shows the lack of gender balance in Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Irish Parliament, since 1918. The 22.5% of seats (36) won by women candidates at the 2020 general election was a record high in the country's electoral history.[2] Relative to their share of the wider population, the reality is that women have been 'grossly underrepresented in Irish politics.'[3]

Figure 1:   Women elected to Dáil Éireann (1918–2020) (%)
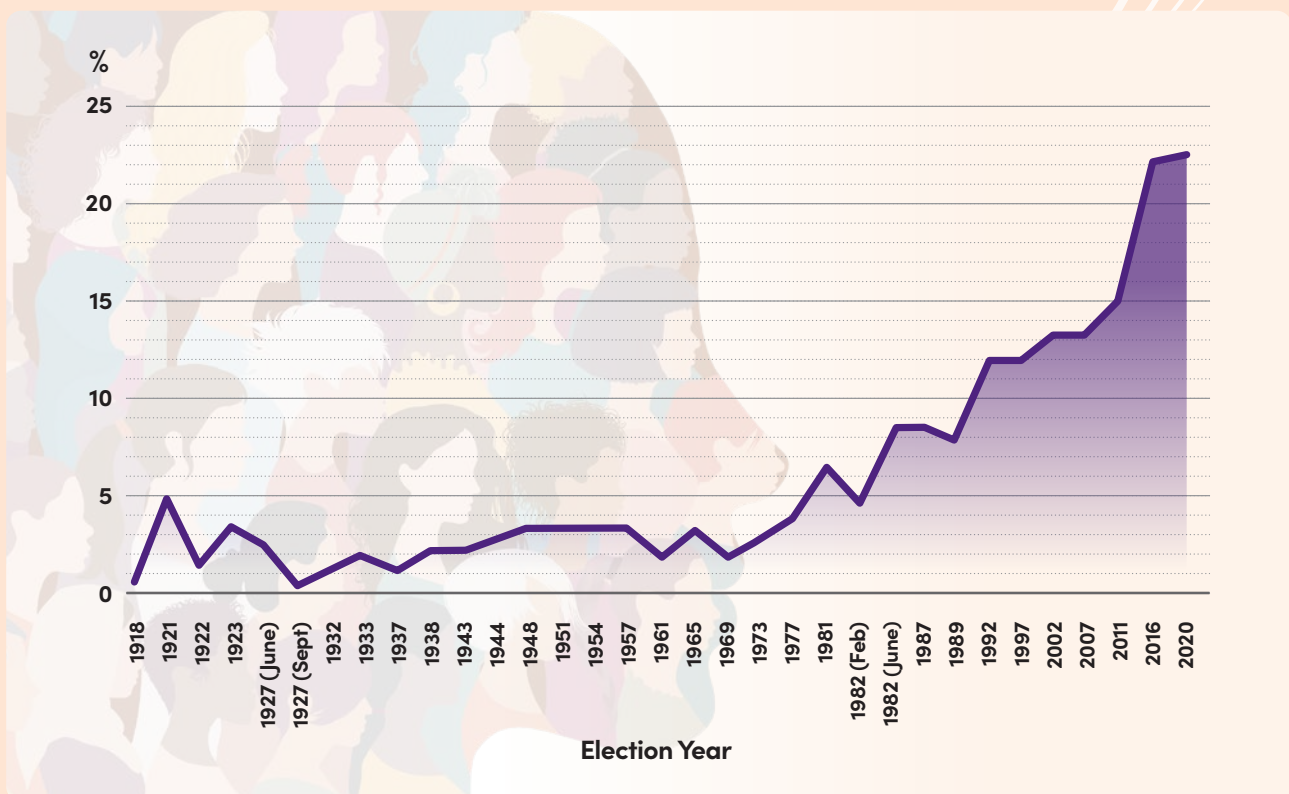
In 2012, following a constellation of pressures, the coalition government legislated for electoral gender quotas to increase the number of women candidates running for the Dáil. The *Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act, 2012*, incentivises political parties to run at least 30% female candidates and 30% male candidates. The threshold rose to 40% in 2023, meaning the next general election will be held on this basis. The sanctions are punitive; non-compliance with the Act would see party organisations lose half of the state funding they receive annually to run their operations.

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1   Keenan & McGing, p.1.
2   This figure has increased to 37 seats (23%) following the election of Ivana Bacik TD in the Dublin Bay South by-election in 2021.
3   Galligan & Buckley, 2018, p.221.

The gender quota was first enacted at the 2016 general election. With a 90% increase in the proportion of women candidates and a 40% increase in the proportion of women TDs, despite a reduction in the number of Dáil seats, the legislation positively impacted women's representation in the lower house in a single electoral cycle. However, as this report will detail, the electoral progress made by women stalled considerably at the next election in 2020, for several reasons.

In her seminal theoretical analysis, Anne Phillips observed that explanations for the global underrepresentation of women in politics tend to be multicausal'; 'they lack the drama of a singular cause.'[4] Ireland's Decade of Centenaries, beginning in 2012, has provided scholars with an opportunity to reflect on the causes and consequences of gender inequalities in formal political institutions over the past century, and to assess the effectiveness of strategies to increase women's participation and representation.[5]

Despite significant socio-cultural changes for women in employment and education and the liberalisation of societal attitudes to gender equality, Ireland still lags behind most of its European counterparts in women's parliamentary representation. Researchers have identified multiple explanations for this, focusing on the interaction of institutional, socio-cultural and political variables.[6]

Above all, the underrepresentation of women TDs is associated with gendered candidate selection processes in political party organisations.[7] A combination of individual and structural factors shapes the 'supply' and 'demand' of women candidates at the party level.[8] Further, parties' strategic planning for general election campaigns directly impacts the electoral prospects of women and men (for example, decisions about placement into winnable seats or the distribution of candidate resources), as do voter preferences.[9]

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4   Phillips, 1991, p.79.
5   Keenan & McGing, 2021.
6   Buckley & Galligan, 2018; McGing, 2013; Tremblay, 2008.
7   Keenan & Buckley, 2023.
8   Norris & Lovenduski, 1995.
9   Mariani et al, 2020.

RESEARCH AIMS

This report provides one of the most comprehensive accounts to date of the selection and election of women TDs in recent general elections. The research's strength is that it does not focus on a single election in isolation as many previous studies have done, but spans multiple general elections to survey continuity and change for women in national politics, including the impact of candidate gender quotas.

The central concern is why vastly more men than women succeed in moving through 'the eye of the needle' into the Dáil chamber.[10] The report draws upon ideas from a growing body of literature on candidate recruitment, categorising the political pipeline into different stages: *aspirants*, *candidates* and *elected representatives*.[11] Importantly, women could be 'derailed' in their ambitions for political office at any, or all, of these stages.

Chapter 1 examines candidate selection processes in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (from 2011 to 2020), traditionally Ireland's largest parties, with the greatest bearing on women's representation.[12] Is women's underrepresentation in the Dáil a consequence of a lack of supply or demand, or the interaction of both factors? Have gender norms in these parties changed since the implementation of quotas? What differentiates successful and unsuccessful aspirants, and does gender play a role?

Chapter 2 focuses on the outcomes of Dáil elections for women across the political system (1992-2020). How does party competition structure women's representation in the lower house? Is candidate success gendered, and why? Are women selected to run for seats that are actually winnable? Is there any evidence of voter bias against women? Are the workings of the electoral system gendered?

Coming from a feminist and gender-sensitive position, the research sees women's political equality as a 'good thing.'[13] It offers practical, evidence-based recommendations for political parties and government stakeholders on advancing the selection and election of women TDs, which is crucial for the health and status of Ireland's democracy.

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[10]   Norris & Lovenduski, 1995, p.1.
[11]   Norris & Lovenduski, 1995.
[12]   McGing, 2013.
[13]   Evans, 2011.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This report analyses gender-disaggregated selection and election data to explain why there are so few women TDs in the Dáil. As a methodology, quantitative analysis highlights disparities in women's and men's presence across the political system, but also offers insights into the effectiveness of measures to increase women's representation, including gender quotas.[14]

Chapter 1 uses rare data on winning and losing aspirants for candidate selection in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in 2011, 2016 and 2020.[15] All constituencies are included, a total of 244 across the two parties. It also details cases where party HQ directly intervened to mandate the selection of women, and where women (and men) were added to tickets post-convention. Aspirants' prior political experience, if any, was also captured. Candidate selection has been described as the 'secret garden of politics' – an obscure process, hidden away from view.[16] Parties do not publish data on unsuccessful aspirants, nor shed light on direct interventions by HQ. This required collating and verifying this information from multiple sources[17], including local and national news outlets[18], direct contact with party staff, officers and members, party websites, social media accounts and information compiled and published by other academics.[19] Where possible, aspirant gender has been verified using more than one source.

Chapter 2 draws from a gender-disaggregated dataset of all candidates and elected TDs in the seven general elections held between 1992 to 2020.[20] Political affiliation, incumbency or non-incumbency, constituency magnitude and electoral success were added as variables. Since 2016, a gender identifier for each candidate has been included in the publication of the final results of general elections on oireachtas.ie. However, for general elections before 2016, no official source reports on candidate gender. Various sources had to be consulted, including local and national news outlets, electionsireland.org, party websites, personal websites of candidates, election literature and academic publications. Where possible, candidate gender has been verified using more than one source.[21]

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[14]   Stauffer & O'Brien, 2019.

[15]   Due to a greater availability of sources, it was possible to collate a full list of aspirants in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael; these parties have also had the greatest bearing on women's Dáil representation (see **Chapter 2**). For other parties, information on conventions was patchier at the constituency level.

[16]   Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015.

[17]   The dataset was originally created in 2011, updated in 2016, and finalised in 2023 to include the 2020 general election. As the data was hand-coded, the overall figures may be subject to coder error.

[18]   In particular, local newspapers provide a vital source of information on candidate selection decisions.

[19]   Thank you to Adrian Kavanagh (Maynooth University) for sharing his 2020 general election dataset. See his blog on 2020 general election candidates here: https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2017/04/19/candidates-for-the-next-2017-2021-general-election-by-constituency/. 'Candidate selection' chapters written by Theresa Reidy (University College Cork) for the 2011, 2016 and 2020 editions of *How Ireland Voted* (Palgrave Macmillan) were also consulted.

[20]   The author has made part of this dataset publicly available via the Women for Election Data Hub. See: https://datahub.womenforelection.ie/pages/general-elections.

[21]   For a detailed overview of gender data collation and verification, see: https://datahub.womenforelection.ie/pages/about.

A NOTE ON THE LACK OF INTERSECTIONAL DATA

Women for Election recognises that achieving gender equality in politics depends on the balanced representation of diverse groups of women. Studies show that the obstacles and opportunities for women in Irish politics are mediated by class, ethnicity, disability, migrant status and age, among other equality grounds.[22] For this research, it was possible to compile binary gender statistics from multiple sources. However, there is limited data on the wider diversity profile of aspirants, candidates and TDs, apart from qualitative indicators.[23] As a tool for driving political diversity, it is essential that stakeholders find mechanisms to collate, monitor and report disaggregated intersectional data on selection and election pathways, including success rates for different social groups.[24]

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[22]   Cullen & Gough, 2022; Cullen & McGing, 2019; Lima, 2020.
[23]   From example, see Lima, 2020.
[24]   On the importance of intersectional data in electoral politics, see Centenary Action Group, 2020. See also Cullen & Gough, 2022.

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CHAPTER 1

From aspirants to candidates: Gender and candidate selection in general elections, 2011–2020

As the 'choice before the choice', candidate selection in parties has been identified as a critical point in the pipeline for all aspiring to elected office, especially for women and minority groups. Yet, scholars still know very little about internal party decision-making processes on recruitment and how this drives gender representation, not least on the wider pool who aspire to a place on the ticket but fail. For this reason, candidate selection is often described as the 'secret garden' of politics'.[25] Selected candidates and TDs are only 'the tip of the iceberg', coming at the end of the recruitment cycle, rather than the start.[26]

Using Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as case studies[27], this chapter examines how candidate recruitment at the constituency and national levels impacted on the selection of women in the 2011, 2016 and 2020 general elections.

THE DYNAMICS OF CANDIDATE SELECTION

Candidate selection is one of the chief functions of political parties. In Ireland, the process of selecting candidates has been described as a 'managed democracy.'[28] Each party has internal rules and norms for candidacy, including the practical implementation of gender quotas at the constituency level.[29] To ensure the efficiency of the vote in multi-seat constituencies with PR-STV, a delicate balance must be struck between decision-making by party headquarters (HQ) and constituency-level structures.[30] The challenge for party leaders is to ensure that a strategic approach is taken to candidate selection nationally, while also protecting the democratic right of party members to choose their preferred candidate(s). Party HQ will normally specify the number of candidates to be selected per constituency. After this, decision-making is decentralised to party members, with all Irish parties employing One Member One Vote (OMOV) for local conventions.[31] Party HQ ratifies the convention results, but deselection is very rare. Leadership can issue pre-convention directives or add candidates to tickets after the convention for strategic reasons – as they run larger tickets, these powers tend to be most commonly used in the larger parties.

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[25]   Ashe, 2019.
[26]   Norris & Lovenduski, 1995.
[27]   The same methodological approach could be applied to any political party if the data was available.
[28]   Weeks, 2008.
[29]   Buckley et al, 2016.
[30]   Reidy, 2011.
[31]   Reidy, 2022.

The candidate selection process is crucial to understanding the gender profile (and other demographics) of Dáil Éireann. Political recruitment is comparable to the shortlisting phase of a job interview where 'parties engage in a pre-screen process choosing the people who will appear on the ballot paper with their party label.'[32] For underrepresented groups, it is a key intermediary stage in the pipeline to elected office: first, women must personally decide to go forward for selection (often preceded by prior experience as a party member and activist)[33]; second, to run for election, a competitive party nomination is required.[34]

The dominant framework for theorising gender and political recruitment is the 'supply and demand model.'[35] Supply-side explanations contend that not enough women come forward for selection because they lack the required resources – for instance, confidence, ambition, prior political experience, time, finance, childcare, etc. While measures commonly put in place to increase the supply of women candidates usually focus on supporting individuals (for example, confidence-building programmes), it should be noted that supply-side factors arise from wider systemic issues for women, including persistent inequalities in the gender division of labour, workforce participation patterns, and the gendered socialisation of girls from an early age. On the other hand, demand-side factors assume that women's political inequality is due to a lack of demand on the part of party selectors (or voters); the criteria associated with a 'good' candidate may act to disadvantage women.[36] As a reform mechanism, legal gender quotas aim to increase parties' demand for women,

across the political system. Importantly, supply- and demand-side factors interact in complex ways to shape the opportunity structure.[37] For instance, women may hesitate to seek a nomination if they perceive a gendered disadvantage.

WHAT FACTORS DO SELECTORS PRIORITISE?

Despite the recognised role of candidate selection in hindering or facilitating women's political representation, little is known globally about the preferences of party selectors and the attributes they equate with 'electability'.[38] Researchers agree that women win disproportionally fewer seats than men because they secure fewer opportunities to run for parties. However, with limited insight into the entirety of the political pipeline (normally, gender-disaggregated data is available on selected candidates, not aspirants), there is no academic consensus as to whether gender inequality in politics is due to a low supply of women aspiring to office, or a lack of selector demand for new women candidates.

Reflecting on candidate selections for Irish general elections, Reidy[39] observes that:

'It is possible to speculate on some features that may be important to party members by drawing interferences from the profile of the candidates that were chosen. This does not provide a complete answer because nothing is ever known of those who did not make it through the selection convention process. Inferences about selector preferences are thus based entirely on an examination of successful candidates.'

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32 Reidy, 2021, p.41.
33 Cullen & McGing, 2019.
34 Apart from women who decide to run on a non-partisan basis as independents.
35 Ashe; 2019; Evans, 2011; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995.
36 McGing, 2018.
37 McGing, 2018.
38 Ashe, 2019.
39 Reidy, 2011.

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WHO WINS AND WHO LOSES AT PARTY CONVENTIONS?

To address these gaps, this chapter uses rare data to explain why some and not other aspirants successfully came through conventions for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in 2011, 2016 and 2020.[40] By exploring three general elections, two held since the legislation of gender quotas, the research also allows for a novel consideration of how this measure has impacted the 'supply' of women willing to run, if at all.

Before zooming into the research findings, it is important to note that not all constituency conventions for Dáil elections are contested. In many cases, especially where an incumbent(s) has declared their intention to run again or if another strong aspirant is in the frame (such as a local councillor or senator), conventions are held by parties as a matter of formality, with no vote needed.

This report defines aspirants as those nominated to contest a convention and who go forward to party members for selection (including unopposed aspirants). Individuals who were declared/nominated but withdrew their name before the convention vote and those who pulled out running in the general election after being selected are excluded from the analysis for this report.[41] To get a deeper sense of the political pipeline and why women are underrepresented in electoral politics, further research on those who withdraw their name ahead of conventions (aspirant withdrawals) or before the election (candidate withdrawals) would be instructive.[42]

SUPPLY AND DEMAND BEFORE QUOTAS (2011)

Table 1 shows that Fianna Fáil had a low supply of women aspirants in 2011, which was a very challenging general election for the party overall. Of the 87 names put before selectors, only 12 were women (14%). Further, each was the sole female nominee in her constituency. No women contested 31 (out of 43) party conventions, whereas male contenders were in all but two constituencies. Regarding convention outcomes, gender did not arise as a factor in determining success rates, with 83% of women (10) and 85% of men (64) selected. Only two women were unsuccessful, one a sitting councillor. Thus, the low number of women candidates running for Fianna Fáil in 2011 was largely a consequence of gender imbalances in the aspirant pool as opposed to bias on the part of selectors – put simply, when women sought selection, they were almost statistically as likely to be put on the ticket, but fewer women went forward.

Unlike Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael conventions were highly competitive in 2011 due to the party's high popularity in the polls and likelihood of leading the next government. Women were underrepresented among aspirants, with 25 women (18%) and 114 men (82%) competing for a place on the party ticket (**Table 2**). Men contested all conventions, with some areas having up to six male nominees, but no women sought selection in 26 constituencies. Therefore, a lack of supply was a factor behind the party's low number of woman candidates. However, the data also demonstrates that women were less likely to win conventions. While 64% of male aspirants were successfully selected, the figure for women was 56%. Eleven women failed to get on the Fine Gael ticket; the majority were sitting councillors.

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[40]   Candidates added by party HQ are treated separately later in the chapter.

[41]   This follows the same methodological approach as similar studies from other jurisdictions, e.g., Ashe, 2019.

[42]   Interestingly, data kindly shared with the author by Adrian Kavanagh (Maynooth University) finds that at least 29 women and 33 men withdrew as aspirants/candidates in the 2020 general election. Key questions include, why do individuals withdraw from selection or election? Do women and men do it for different reasons? How does it impact on the gender profile of candidates?

SUPPLY AND DEMAND AFTER QUOTAS (2016 AND 2020)

Data on Fianna Fáil selections for the 2016 general election shows a notable increase in the number of women seeking to run, with 30 women contesting conventions (28%) out of a total of 107 aspirants (**Table 1**). Further, compared to 2011, women were better represented locally; at least one woman was put forward in 25 constituencies (out of 40). Importantly, as well as inflating demand for women candidates due to the threat of financial sanctions, the wider discourse around gender quotas may have positively impacted supply, with women members perceiving greater opportunities to run for election for their party. Nonetheless, women aspirants had a lower success rate than men (47% compared to 55%). Sixteen women were unsuccessful. As Fianna Fáil did not return any women TDs in 2011, there were no incumbent women at conventions, reducing the overall female success rate.

In 2020, there was a drop in the number of women going in front of local selectors for the Fianna Fáil ticket (**Table 1**). Across the 39 constituencies, 23 women (24%) and 72 men (76%) sought to be selected. Men contested all but three conventions, but no women were represented in 21 cases. While the success rate for women remained stable (48%), there was a wider gender gap in success relative to 2016, with 65% of male aspirants selected to run for the party. In total, 12 women aspirants did not move up the next stage of the ladder.

In Fine Gael, though the number of women contesting conventions remained stable at 25, the percentage rose to 24% with fewer men competing for selection (**Table 2**). Women aspirants were more widely spread geographically, with one or two women represented at half of the party's conventions (19 out of 40). In all but two constituencies, at least one man contested the race; in both cases, a woman incumbent TD was seeking reselection. Interestingly, there were no gender differences in success rates, with 72% of women and men selected. Seven women were not selected at conventions.

Once again, there was no change in the number of women seeking selection for Fine Gael in the 2020 general election, with the figure consistent at 25 (up to 26%) (**Table 2**). No women contested 20 conventions, but men were represented in all but three constituencies. Quotas do not appear to have driven up the supply of women "on the ground" in the same way as Fianna Fáil; however, Fine Gael started out with a bigger pool of women aspirants, with Fianna Fáil now moving closer in line (using the 2011 general election as a baseline). In 2020, the success rate for women in Fine Gael fell to 68% and was 74% for men. Eight women did not come through the convention process.

Table 1: Breakdown of aspirants by gender in Fianna Fáil, 2011–2020

Fianna Fáil	Women	Successful women	Men	Successful men
2011	12 (14%)	10 (83%)	75 (86%)	64 (85%)
2016	30 (28%)	14 (47%)	77 (72%)	42 (55%)
2020	23 (24%)	11 (48%)	72 (76%)	47 (65%)

Table 2: Breakdown of aspirants by gender in Fine Gael, 2011–2020

Fine Gael	Women	Successful women	Men	Successful men
2011	25 (18%)	14 (56%)	114 (82%)	73 (64%)
2016	25 (24%)	18 (72%)	79 (76%)	57 (72%)
2020	25 (26%)	17 (68%)	70 (74%)	52 (74%)

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL EXPERIENCE

Of course, gender is not the sole indicator of the aspirant population and why some individuals come through conventions and others do not. As a whole, selectors favour would-be Dáil candidates with prior political experience, and this also influences who goes forward for selection – the vast majority of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael aspirants in 2011, 2016 and 2020 were sitting office-holders, or had been elected (or run) in the past. If one is not contesting a convention as a sitting TD (who are almost guaranteed to be reselected, often unopposed), the next best thing is to be a local councillor or, though the numbers are smaller, an outgoing senator. These groups not only dominate the pool of aspirants, but they also have much higher success rates than those without political experience, including long-time party activists.

Scholars have long established the electoral advantages of local government experience for general election candidates, being more statistically significant for women.[43] Service in local politics allows those aiming for a Dáil career to establish a local base and build visibility with voters. Importantly, this report shows that local office-holding is also a critical component of the aspirant-to-candidate pipeline. In terms of advancing the selection and election of women TDs, a fundamental problem is that women are similarly vastly underrepresented in local government, currently holding only 26% of council seats.

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43   Buckley et al, 2015.

DIRECT INTERVENTIONS BY PARTY HQ

Over the years, party leaders have been cautious about directly imposing on selection decisions, especially on the grounds of gender. Prior to the legislation of quotas in 2012, gender targets in parties were voluntary and self-regulated, supplemented with soft measures like training and capacity-building for women members, with minimal impact on candidate recruitment for Dáil elections.[44] Compared to Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, left-learning and smaller parties more proactively emphasised gender equality objectives among members, leading to a higher percentage of women candidates, but with less of a national impact on women's representation (see **Chapter 2**). When party leaders imposed on constituency selections before the 2016 general election, it was usually to ensure geographical balance on the ticket. By contrast, gender directives issued by party HQ requiring the selection of at least one woman were extremely rare; for example, there was only one reported case of this occurring in the 2011 general election, in Fine Gael in Dún Laoghaire.[45]

One of the consequences of gender quotas on larger party organisations is that it has required HQ to take a more interventionist approach to candidate selection, especially in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.[46] As the analysis above shows, both parties have had to contend with a male-dominated pool of incumbent TDs and aspirant candidates for seat vacancies. For this reason, party leaders had a more decisive influence over the selection of women candidates in 2016 and 2020 compared to previous general elections.

Party strategists have identified two mechanisms to influence the gender profile of tickets: pre-convention gender directives and post-convention ticket additions.

PRE-CONVENTION GENDER DIRECTIVES

The specifics of gender directives to constituency organisations differ, but all directives have mandated party members to select *at least* one woman for the ticket. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael issued five directives each to constituency conventions ahead of the 2016 general election.

Fianna Fáil HQ communicated gender directives to its members in Dublin Central, Dublin South-Central, Galway East, Louth and Longford-Westmeath. In both Dublin Central and Dublin South-Central, party HQ stipulated a single candidate ticket, and the nominee had to be a woman. This proved controversial among some party members, especially in Dublin Central, where a male aspirant would later challenge the quota legislation in the courts.[47] Outside of Dublin, gender directives were applied to tickets where two Fianna Fáil nominees were to be chosen – one woman and one man. There were also reports of disquiet in these areas, no more so than in Longford-Westmeath, where members were given one day's notice of a directive to select a woman candidate in Longford (separate conventions were held for each country; the incumbent male TD was selected unopposed in Westmeath). The sole woman nominated for the Longford convention was automatically selected, leading to an 'uproar' in the constituency as members felt the party leadership had undermined their democratic right to select a candidate of their choosing.[48]

44   McGing, 2013.
45   Buckey & McGing, 2011.
46   Reidy, 2022.
47   Buckley et al, 2016.
48   Buckley et al, 2016.

A motion of no confidence in the candidate was passed and there were calls to reconvene the selection convention through an appeal to the Fianna Fáil national executive, but these were dismissed. It was reported that many members refused to campaign for the candidate, who was unsuccessful in the election.

In Fine Gael, all directives were implemented in constituencies where the strategy was to run multiple candidate tickets: Dublin Bay North, Dublin West, Dublin Rathdown, Kildare South and Longford–Westmeath. Like Fianna Fáil, there were reports of disagreement among members in some constituencies, most notably in Dublin Bay North and Kildare South, showcasing the need for the party leadership to carefully manage these interventions in future elections.[49]

Importantly, when candidate selections were initiated for the 2020 general election, the discourse around gender balance had become more normalised. While post-convention additions remained a notable feature of selection processes in the largest parties (see below), party strategists spoke of less need to intervene directly in constituency selections via gender directives.[50] Fine Gael HQ mandated the nomination of women candidates in Dublin West (a two-candidate ticket) and Longford–Westmeath (a three-candidate ticket). Fianna Fáil HQ did not make any use of gender directives in 2020.

POST-CONVENTION TICKET ADDITIONS

As discussed, party HQ can directly add candidates to tickets after conventions. Historically, additions were usually made for geographical balance. Mostly, men benefitted from add-on nominations, particularly male councillors, mirroring the decisions made by members at conventions.[51] In 2011, only five of 27 additional candidates across the party system were women (19%).[52] Since the implementation of gender quotas, larger parties have used additions to help meet the 30% threshold; more women than men were added to tickets in 2016 and 2020. Nine of the 16 add-on Fianna Fáil candidates in 2016 were women, while Fine Gael added nine women and six men. In 2020, Fianna Fáil HQ added 14 women and 11 men. Of the 21 candidates added by Fine Gael HQ, 11 were women.

In several cases, add-candidates had initially unsuccessfully contested for selection or withdrawn ahead of the convention. Many were local councillors.[53]

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49   Buckley et al, 2016.

50   Reidy, 2021.

51   For example, of the c.40 candidates added to party tickets at the 2007 general election, only six were women (figures compiled by the author from various sources).

52   Buckley & McGing, 2011. This figure includes additions made by Labour Party HQ.

53   Kavanagh, 2020.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Candidate selection in political parties is a critical intermediary stage for all those aspiring to elected office, especially for women and minority groups. Supply- and demand-side factors interact in complex ways to shape the gendered opportunity structure for women candidates.

An analysis of constituency conventions for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael shows that the lack of women candidates on the ballot paper is primarily due to a lack of supply, though there have been gender gaps in success rates to favour men. Notably, while the supply of women aspirants has increased in Fianna Fáil since the implementation of gender quotas (compared to the 2011 baseline), it has remained stable in Fine Gael.

Party selectors favour Dáil candidates with prior political experience, and this also influences who goes forward for selection – the vast majority of aspirants seeking to run for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in 2011, 2016 and 2010 were sitting office-holders, or had been elected (or run) in the past. This is in itself gendered, as women account for a low number of incumbent TDs and local councillors, perpetuating the cycle of gender inequality in the convention process.

One of the consequences of gender quotas on larger party organisations is that it has required HQ to take a more interventionist approach to candidate selection. Party strategists in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have identified two mechanisms to influence the gender profile of tickets: pre-convention gender directives and post-convention ticket additions. While the former approach was less commonly used in the 2020 general election compared to 2016, add-ons remained an important mechanism for party leaders to meet the quota threshold.

CHAPTER 2

From candidates to the Dáil: Gender and electoral success in general elections (1992–2020)

Once women are nominated to run as candidates, the next step on the political ladder to Dáil Éireann is to face the electorate. Similar to candidate selection processes, the outcomes of Irish general elections have been highly gendered, with a persistent pattern of women's underrepresentation on election day – even if the number of women TDs has (slowly) increased over time. As outlined earlier, women have never secured more than 22.5% of Dáil seats in any general election (**Figure 1**).

In their quest for an explanation, political scientists have examined whether negative voter bias has affected the electoral prospects of women candidates. Research on recent general elections shows that Irish voters do not penalise (nor favour) candidates because of gender; they primarily base their choice on a candidate's political affiliation, prior electoral experience or local factors.[54] Thus, if voters are not to blame for gender imbalances, the structures influencing candidate selection and party campaigning strategies are crucial to explaining the low number of women TDs elected.[55]

Once women have been selected as candidates, what factors enable or constrain their prospects of securing (and keeping) a Dáil seat? Using a comprehensive dataset of all Irish general elections from 1992 to 2020, this report chapter provides a gendered analysis of electoral success across time and space. The analytical framework is guided by academic literature, cited throughout the chapter.

THE NATIONAL PICTURE: WOMEN WINNING DÁIL SEATS

From the 1918 general election, when (a limited constituency of) Irish women first won the right to vote and run for national office, to the end of the 1970s, women TDs were significantly underrepresented in the Dáil (**Figure 1**). In the decades after independence, most women deputies were relatives of men who died while holding office – an indication of the male-gendered political culture that took hold in the state's early years. In this period, no general election returned more than six women TDs; the number of women elected in 1977 was the same as in 1921. The general elections of the 1980s established more diversity among the increasing (but still small) number of women TDs. They included women without a familial political background and campaigners in the 'second wave' feminist movement.

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54   Keenan & Brennan, 2021.
55   McElroy & Marsh, 2011.

The picture began to change in the 1990s as Ireland's profound economic and social changes fostered new opportunities for women in the public sphere, including higher educational attainment and workforce participation levels. Women accounted for 12% of TDs elected in 1992 – this was a record high at this point in electoral history and came two years after the election of Mary Robinson as the first woman President of Ireland. However, the political advancement of women in the early 1990s would prove to be short-lived. The proportion of women TDs returned on election day more or less plateaued over the next two decades, from 12% to 15.1%. Between the 1992 and 2011 elections, the total number of women TDs returned to parliament increased by just five. The lack of women holding seats in the lower house also negatively affected the gender balance in ministerial appointments – and, more broadly, the representation of women's policy interests in parliamentary discourse.[56]

Following the first rollout of a 30% gender quota at the 2016 general election, there was a 90% increase in women's candidacy and a 40% increase in the number of women TDs returned. Women secured 35 seats (of 158), accounting for 22.1% of representatives. Despite this, as observed in previous years, progress was stalled at the next general election. Despite a record proportion of women candidates running in 2020, the number of women TDs increased by just one (to 36), representing 22.6% of seats.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE ELECTION OF WOMEN TDS

Political scientists have long emphasised that party organisations are critical to facilitating opportunities for women to enter parliament.[57] As Galligan has argued, women's low seat-holding in Ireland is inextricably bound up with the low number of women candidates[58] – and the vast majority of candidates come through the political party system.[59] Scholars have argued that rather than being a problem of voter bias, the key to tackling the underrepresentation of women TDs is to reform party nomination processes to put more women on the ballot paper, in winnable seats and with adequate campaign resources.[60]

GENDERED REPRESENTATION RATES BY PARTY

Throughout the twentieth century, vast differences were recorded in the proportion of women TDs elected across the Irish party system. Historically, the most dominant parties at the polls, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, tended to both nominate and elect fewer women TDs than other parties. Between the 1933[61] and 1989 general elections, these two parties secured over three-quarters of all Dáil seats but elected only 30 women TDs.[62] Therefore, the nature of electoral competition, and its interaction with socially conservative party cultures, significantly impacted women's historical seat-holding in the lower chamber.[63]

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56   Buckley & Galligan, 2018.
57   Tremblay, 2008.
58   Galligan, 2008.
59   McGing, 2013.
60   Buckley & Keenan, 2021; Cullen & McGing, 2019.
61   Fine Gael was founded in 1933. Fianna Fáil was founded in 1926.
62   Figure calculated by the author.
63   McGing, 2013.

While not all minor parties in the twentieth century were amenable to women candidates, from the 1980s onwards, smaller parties were often more likely to recruit a higher proportion (but not necessarily numbers) of women than Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – the main examples being the Labour Party, the Green Party, Democratic Left[64] and the Progressive Democrats.[65] The lack of incumbent TDs in these parties facilitated the recruitment of new women candidates. Furthermore, by this period, most parties on the left and centre-left had adopted internal rules or soft targets for gender representation, to varying degrees of success, but this was not yet the case in the larger parties. However, though smaller organisations selected a higher proportion of women to run, this did not significantly impact the total number of women TDs in a political landscape where these parties secured fewer seats.[66]

An in-depth analysis of general election results from 1992 to 2007, shown in **Tables 3 to 6** demonstrates considerable variation between parties in the percentage of women TDs winning seats. In these years, Fianna Fáil secured the largest share of seats in each general election, followed by Fine Gael. The number and percentage of women TDs selected and elected to represent Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over this 15-year period was very low relative to their combined strength at the polls; women never accounted for more than one in 10 of party TDs. By contrast, in proportional terms, smaller parties were more inclined to facilitate opportunities for women members to move up the political ladder. In particular, the Progressive Democrats and the Labour Party (in 2002 and 2007) stand out for women's representation.

Table 3: Women candidates and TDs in the 1992 general election

Party	Total number of candidates	Women candidates	%	Total number of TDs	Women TDs	%
Fianna Fáil	122	12	9.8	68	5	7.4
Fine Gael	91	12	13.2	45	5	11.1
Labour Party	42	8	19.0	33	5	15.2
Progressive Democrats	20	9	45.0	10	4	40.0
Democratic Left	20	6	30.0	4	1	25.0
Green Party	19	7	36.8	1	0	0.0
Other	64	12	18.8	1	0	0.0
Independents	103	23	22.3	3	0	0.0
Total	**481**	**89**	**18.5**	**165**	**20**	**12.1**

[64] Democratic Left was a left-wing political party in Ireland between 1992 and 1999. It merged with the Labour Party in 1999.
[65] The Progressive Democrats was a conservative-liberal party. It was founded in 1985 and formally dissolved in 2009.
[66] McGing, 2013.

Table 4: Women candidates and TDs in the 1997 general election

Party	Total number of candidates	Women candidates	%	Total number of TDs	Women TDs	%
Fianna Fáil	111	14	12.6	77	8	10.4
Fine Gael	91	15	16.5	54	6	11.1
Labour Party	44	12	27.3	17	2	11.8
Green Party	26	9	34.6	2	0	0.0
Sinn Féin	15	2	13.3	1	0	0.0
Progressive Democrats	30	13	43.3	4	2	50.0
Socialist Party	5	2	40.0	1	0	0.0
Democratic Left	13	4	30.8	4	1	25.0
Other	45	12	26.7	0	0	0.0
Independents	104	14	13.5	6	1	16.7
Total	**484**	**97**	**20.0**	**166**	**20**	**12.0**

Table 5: Women candidates and TDs in the 2002 general election

Party	Total number of candidates	Women candidates	%	Total number of TDs	Women TDs	%
Fianna Fáil	106	13	12.3	81	7	8.6
Fine Gael	85	15	17.6	31	2	6.5
Labour Party	46	11	23.9	20	7	35.0
Green Party	31	9	29.0	6	0	0.0
Sinn Féin	37	7	18.9	5	0	0.0
Progressive Democrats	20	6	30.0	8	4	50.0
Socialist Party	5	2	40.0	1	0	0.0
Other	49	8	16.3	1	0	0.0
Independents	84	14	16.7	12	2	16.7
Total	**463**	**85**	**18.4**	**165**	**22**	**13.3**

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Table 6: Women candidates and TDs in the 2007 general election

Party	Total number of candidates	Women candidates	%	Total number of TDs	Women TDs	%
Fianna Fáil	106	14	13.2	77	7	9.1
Fine Gael	91	15	16.5	51	5	9.8
Labour Party	50	11	22.0	20	7	35.0
Green Party	44	11	25.0	6	1	16.7
Sinn Féin	41	10	24.4	4	0	0.0
Progressive Democrats	30	7	23.3	2	1	50.0
Socialist Party	4	1	25.0	0	0	0.0
People Before Profit	5	2	40.0	0	0	0.0
Other	24	2	8.3	0	0	0.0
Independents	75	9	12.0	5	1	20.0
Total	470	82	17.4	165	22	13.3

The Irish party system was altered dramatically at the 2011 general election. The results by gender and political affiliation are summarised in **Table 7**. Fine Gael replaced Fianna Fáil as the largest party in Dáil Éireann for the first time in history. After winning 37 seats, the Labour Party moved from being the third party in a 'two- and a half-party system' to the second-biggest party in the lower house.

Over one-quarter of Labour Party nominees were women, translating into one-fifth of the party's seats. At a national level, however, the gains made by Labour women TDs in 2011 were offset by two factors: first, the fact that Fianna Fáil returned no women TDs; second, in Fine Gael, women comprised only 14.5% of winning candidates (nonetheless, with 11 seats, the number of women TDs in the party had more than doubled since 2007). The 2011 general election was also electorally significant for Sinn Féin. The organisation increased its share of seats from four to 14, but just two were attained by women candidates. Two of the five deputies elected to represent the United Left Alliance (ULA) were women. The Green Party lost all of its seats, one of which was held by a woman TD.

Table 7: Women candidates and TDs in the 2011 general election

Party	Total number of candidates	Women candidates	%	Total number of TDs	Women TDs	%
Fianna Fáil	75	11	14.7	19	0	0.0
Fine Gael	104	16	15.4	76	11	14.5
Labour Party	68	18	26.5	37	8	21.6
Green Party	43	8	18.6	0	0	0.0
Sinn Féin	41	8	19.5	14	2	14.3
United Left Alliance	20	5	25.0	5	2	40.0
Other	24	3	12.5	1	0	0.0
Independents	190	17	8.9	13	2	15.4
Total	**565**	**86**	**15.2**	**165**	**25**	**15.2**

As discussed, the 2016 general election was Ireland's first 'quota' election. All political parties registered an increase in their share of women candidates (**Table 8**). Smaller parties significantly exceeded the minimum quota of 30%. By contrast, despite running more candidates than other parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were only marginally above the threshold. In terms of seats, all parties made gains in women's representation. Even though Fine Gael lost seats, it retained its outgoing number of women TDs and reported a percentage increase in the proportion of women in the parliamentary party. In what was a challenging election for Labour, the party elected only two women candidates (a loss of six) but similarly increased its percentage of women TDs. Fianna Fáil more than doubled its seat share and elected six women TDs after starting from a base of zero, but only 13.6% of its TDs were women. Meanwhile, Sinn Féin saw a considerable increase in the party's national representation levels and its number and proportion of women TDs. The Green Party attained two seats, a woman and a man. Another feature of the 2016 general election was the emergence of the Social Democrats, the AAA–PBP, the Independent Alliance and Independents for Change. All of these new parties/political groupings elected women TDs. In the case of the Social Democrats, women TDs won two of the three seats. As observed in previous general elections, newer parties like the Social Democrats are 'free of institutionalised legacies of male incumbency and male over-representation' and thus are enabled to facilitate more women candidates.[67]

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[67]   Buckley & Galligan, 2020, p.6.

Table 8: Women candidates and TDs in the 2016 general election

Party	Total number of candidates	Women candidates	%	Total number of TDs	Women TDs	%
Fianna Fáil	71	22	31.0	44	6	13.6
Fine Gael	88	27	30.7	49	11	22.4
Sinn Féin	50	18	36.0	23	6	26.1
Labour Party	36	13	36.1	7	2	28.6
Green Party	40	14	35.0	2	1	50.0
Social Democrats	14	6	42.9	3	2	66.7
AAA–PBP	31	13	41.9	6	2	33.3
Independent Alliance	20	5	25.0	6	0	0.0
Independents 4 Change	5	2	40.0	4	2	50.0
Other	59	18	30.5	0	0	0.0
Independents	137	25	18.2	13	3	23.1
Total	551	163	29.6	157	35	22.3

A major talking point of the 2020 general election was the lack of progress in the number of women TDs elected, despite it being the second time that gender quotas were mandated. The results are presented in **Table 9**. The election contest was an unprecedented three-horse race between Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and Fine Gael. Again, there was variation between parties regarding gender, with smaller parties exceeding the 30% quota threshold to a larger degree. The three most successful parties at the polls had a similar percentage of women candidates, with the highest being the Sinn Féin figure of 33.3% (a decrease since 2016). In a record-breaking election for Sinn Féin, the party secured the highest percentage of first preference votes nationwide and won its biggest share of seats. Fourteen of its successful candidates were women, representing 35% of the party's cohort of TDs. Fianna Fáil, on the other hand, saw the number of women TDs fall by one, but its percentage of women remained stable at 13.5%. Of the 11 seats previously held by women TDs in Fine Gael, five were lost, and the party's share of women in the Dáil fell to 17.1%.

Looking across the landscape, Keenan and Brennan[68] provide a gendered reflection of the 2020 general election:

'Most of the gains in terms of women's numeric representation retained post-2016 were largely due to the Sinn Féin surge which resulted in a number of inexperienced female candidates winning new seats on the back of a significant party vote.'

68   Kennan & Brennan, 2021.

Despite ambitions for electoral growth, the Labour Party did not return any women TDs. While the Green Party secured a record high of 12 seats, only two of these seats were won by women. This was despite women accounting for a large proportion of the party's nominees. The Social Democrats selected and elected the highest percentage of women compared to all other parties; once again, women were a majority of the party's TDs. One woman was elected among the five successful People Before Profit (PBP) candidates. Of the four candidates who ran for Independents 4 Change, the only woman candidate was returned.

Table 9: Women candidates and TDs in the 2020 general election

Party	Total number of candidates	Women candidates	%	Total number of TDs	Women TDs	%
Fianna Fáil	84	26	31.0	37	5	13.5
Fine Gael	82	25	30.5	35	6	17.1
Sinn Féin	42	14	33.3	37	13	35.1
Labour Party	31	10	32.3	6	0	0.0
Green Party	39	16	41.0	12	2	16.7
Social Democrats	20	11	55.0	6	4	66.7
People Before Profit	37	15	40.5	5	1	20.0
Aontú	26	9	34.6	1	0	0.0
Independents 4 Change	4	1	25.0	1	1	100.0
Other	38	11	28.9	0	0	0.0
Independents	128	24	18.8	19	4	21.1
Total	**531**	**162**	**30.5**	**159**	**36**	**22.6**

While this report largely focuses on political parties, assessing the independent and non-partisan routes to national office is important when examining women's representation in Irish elections.[69] Independents have been a considerable electoral force in Irish politics since the foundation of the state. **Tables 3 to 9** show that the vast majority of independent candidates and TDs have been men; in many cases, the independent pathway to national office has mirrored the male-gendered trends of the party system. The number and percentage of women running as independents waxed and waned between 1992 and 2020 but never rose above the 22.3% figure achieved in 1992. Although gender quota rules do not apply to independents, there is some evidence of a 'diffusion effect' with a significant growth in the proportion of women independents on the ballot paper in 2016 (**Table 8**). The highest number of women independent TDs ever elected was four in 2020 (**Table 9**).
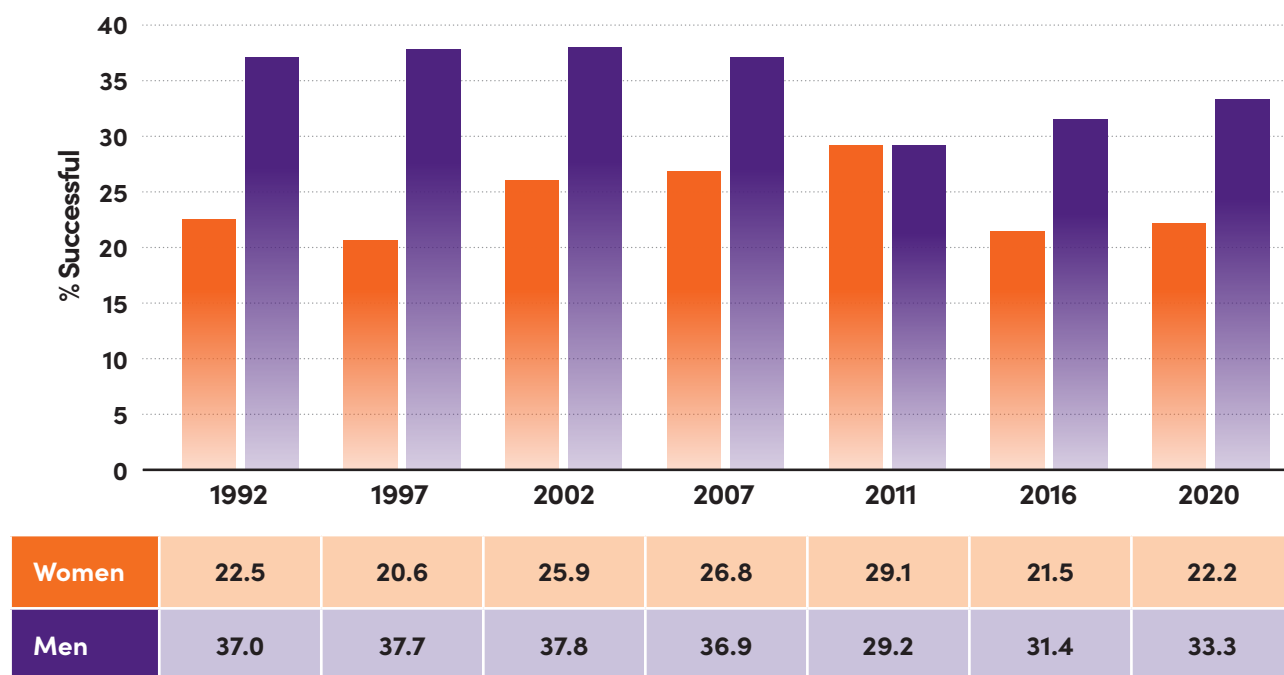
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69   Buckley, 2020.

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CANDIDATE SUCCESS RATES BY GENDER

A key factor in translating candidacies to seats is the success rate of candidates. From the 1970s to the 2007 general election (bar 1973), the success rate of women candidates was significantly lower than that of men.[70] Research on Dáil elections in the 1970s and 1980s provides some evidence of a negative bias against women candidates, including incumbents, during this period.[71] The electorate's reluctance to return women TDs also affected candidate recruitment in parties, with selectors less inclined to run women based on their perceived inability to win votes – especially those without familial ties to politics.[72] Thus, in the early decades after independence, women's underrepresentation in Dáil Éireann was caused by 'both nomination practices and voter reactions.'[73]

On a positive note, studies since the 1990s have concluded that, all else being equal, there is no longer any underlying gender bias against women candidates amongst voters in Dáil elections.[74] Women candidates are receiving more first preference votes (and transfers) than ever before, with the overall number of votes won by women continuing to grow in each election contest. Furthermore, their vote share is ahead of their share of Dáil seats. Although the number of women candidates increased by just one between 2016 and 2020, their total number of first preferences increased by 64,583.[75] Buckley and Galligan argue that 'this trajectory dispels the assumption that voters don't vote for women.'[76]

Figure 2: Candidate success rates by gender, 1992–2020 (%)

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2011	2016	2020
Women	22.5	20.6	25.9	26.8	29.1	21.5	22.2
Men	37.0	37.7	37.8	36.9	29.2	31.4	33.3

70 Buckley & McGing, 2011.
71 Darcy; 1988; Engstrom, 1987; Marsh, 1987.
72 Manning, 1978.
73 Engstrom, 1987.
74 Keenan & Brennan, 2021; Galligan, Laver & Carney, 1997; McElroy & Marsh, 2011.
75 Figure calculated by the author.
76 Buckley & Galligan, 2020, p.8.

Yet, despite these findings, since 1992, the 2011 general election was the only race in modern history where women candidates recorded the same success rate as men (**Figure 2**). Held amid a global economic downturn and a crisis in the Irish public finances, the 2011 contest has been described as an 'earthquake election.' A record number of candidates stood for office, reflecting the political context and feeling of low public morale at the time.[77] Nationally, candidate lists included many male independents who recorded a low vote yield; their presence on the ballot paper decreased men's success rates compared to previous elections.[78] In other races from 1992 to 2020, a considerably higher proportion of men than women managed to convert their candidacy into a seat. Of further concern to gender equality campaigners, success rates for women candidates have fallen since the implementation of gender quotas in 2016. By contrast, men's success rates have increased (compared to the 2011 baseline).

If the problem does not lie with voters, what explains these gender differences in candidate success rates? Several key variables were examined to unpack this question, drawn from a review of the academic literature[79]: party recruitment strategies, the role of incumbency and the number of seats per constituency.

PARTY RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

The presence of PR-STV in Irish general elections has strongly influenced decisions about candidate selection and party strategies – and had gendered effects.[80] Larger parties contesting elections under the PR-STV system need to be cognisant of candidate numbers to ensure the efficiency of their vote, and there can often be intense intra-party competition between candidates for first preference votes and transfers. Too few candidates on the ticket and the party risks giving votes to opposing parties; too many names on the ballot paper and the party risks splitting the vote and losing a seat.[81]

The geographical location of candidates is a critical factor for parties. Vote patterns in Irish general elections show clear 'friends and neighbours' effects, with candidates gaining a higher percentage of the vote in their bailiwick and surrounding areas.[82] Larger parties exploit this in vote-management strategies by selecting candidates from different locales in the constituency. As outlined earlier in the report, until the implementation of gender quotas in 2016, parties running multiple candidate tickets placed a premium on achieving geographical balance, with the recruitment of women a secondary consideration (if even) for selectors. Male candidates predominately benefitted from geographical directives until 2016.[83]

Linked to this, PR-STV encourages larger parties to run 'sweeper candidates' with little prospects of winning a seat but to shore up transfers for the lead candidate, usually an incumbent male TD. The selection of new women candidates as sweepers to meet quota requirements contributes to their electoral disadvantage, undermining the effectiveness

77   Reidy, 2011.
78   Buckley & McGing, 2011.
79   Tremblay, 2008.
80   Galligan, 2008; McGing, 2013.
81   Reidy, 2011.
82   Kavanagh, Durkan & D'Arcy, 2021.
83   Buckley & McGing, 2011.

of quotas in advancing women's seat-holding (beyond candidacy).[84] There is evidence of non-incumbent women being added to tickets by party HQ at a late stage in the election cycle, giving them less time to mount a comprehensive campaign. For this reason, Cullen and McGing conclude: 'The timing of and manner of selection matters [for women].'[85]

The quantitative analysis for this report finds that, across multiple general elections, women candidates in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been less likely to run for seats that are actually winnable (**Table 10**). The success rate for women nominees in each party was particularly low in 2020, while a majority of the men secured seats. Despite their historical strength at the polls, women candidates in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been more marginally positioned than men, with fewer prospects of gaining representation.

Traditionally the 'third party' after Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the Labour Party emerged as the second largest party in the Dáil at the 2011 general election. With the exception of this contest, Labour has tended to run single candidate tickets. Compared to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, since 1992, the party has had

a more mixed record of candidate success by gender (**Table 10**). In many cases, men have been better placed strategically to win seats. However, Labour women were considerably more successful than men in 2002 and 2007.

In 2020, Sinn Féin could be characterised as a major party for the first time in its history in the Republic of Ireland, after winning the highest percentage of first preference votes nationally'. Historically, men had an electoral advantage in the party (**Table 10**). By contrast, women were more successful in 2020. This was against a backdrop of high success rates overall. Sinn Féin missed out on several seats due to candidate under-nomination with many of its candidates, women and men, greatly exceeding the quota but having no running mate to electorally benefit from their surplus votes.

As small and minor parties normally run single candidate tickets, they must make decisions about the selection of candidates for winnable seats and also identify nominees to run in non-competitive areas to build up the national first preference vote.[86] **Table 10** shows a wide range of success rates for women and men in this group.[87]

Table 10:   Candidate success rates by gender and party, 1992–2020

1992 general election		
Party	% Successful women	% Successful men
Fianna Fáil	41.7	57.3
Fine Gael	41.7	50.6
Labour Party	62.5	82.4
Progressive Democrats	44.4	54.5
Democratic Left	16.7	21.4
Green Party	0.0	8.3
Other	0.0	1.9
Independents	0.0	3.8
Total	**22.5**	**37.0**

[84]   Mariani et al, 2020.
[85]   Cullen & McGing, 2019.
[86]   Under the *Electoral Act, 1997*, a registered party is eligible for exchequer funding in proportion to the percentage of total first preference votes its candidates received at the previous general election. This is subject to a minimum threshold of 2% the total first preference votes.
[87]   As the actual numbers are small, statistical trends associated with small and minor parties should be treated with caution.

Table 10 (continued)

1997 general election		
Party	**% Successful women**	**% Successful men**
Fianna Fáil	57.1	71.1
Fine Gael	40.0	63.2
Labour Party	16.7	46.9
Green Party	0.0	11.8
Sinn Féin	0.0	7.7
Progressive Democrats	15.4	11.8
Socialist Party	0.0	33.3
Democratic Left	25.0	33.3
Other	0.0	0.0
Independents	7.1	5.6
Total	**20.6**	**37.7**
2002 general election		
Party	**% Successful women**	**% Successful men**
Fianna Fáil	53.8	79.6
Fine Gael	13.3	41.4
Labour Party	63.6	37.1
Green Party	0.0	27.3
Sinn Féin	0.0	16.7
Progressive Democrats	66.7	28.6
Socialist Party	0.0	33.3
Other	0.0	2.4
Independents	14.3	14.3
Total	**25.9**	**37.8**
2007 general election		
Party	**% Successful women**	**% Successful men**
Fianna Fáil	50.0	76.1
Fine Gael	33.3	60.5
Labour Party	63.6	33.3
Green Party	9.1	15.2
Sinn Féin	0.0	12.9
Progressive Democrats	14.3	4.3
Socialist Party	0.0	0.0
People Before Profit	0.0	0.0
Other	0.0	0.0
Independents	11.1	6.1
Total	**26.8**	**36.9**

Table 10 (continued)

2011 general election		
Party	**% Successful women**	**% Successful men**
Fianna Fáil	0.0	29.7
Fine Gael	68.8	73.9
Labour Party	44.4	58.0
Green Party	0.0	0.0
Sinn Féin	25.0	36.4
United Left Alliance	40.0	20.0
Other	0.0	4.8
Independents	11.8	6.4
Total	**29.1**	**29.2**

2016 general election		
Party	**% Successful women**	**% Successful men**
Fianna Fáil	27.3	77.6
Fine Gael	40.7	62.3
Sinn Féin	33.3	53.1
Labour Party	15.4	21.7
Green Party	7.1	3.8
Social Democrats	33.3	12.5
AAA–PBP	15.4	22.2
Independent Alliance	0.0	40.0
Independents 4 Change	100.0	66.7
Other	0.0	0.0
Independents	12.0	8.9
Total	**21.5**	**31.4**

2020 general election		
Party	**% Successful women**	**% Successful men**
Fianna Fáil	19.2	55.2
Fine Gael	24.0	50.9
Sinn Féin	92.9	85.7
Labour Party	0.0	28.6
Green Party	12.5	43.5
Social Democrats	36.4	22.2
People Before Profit	6.7	18.2
Aontú	0.0	5.9
Independents 4 Change	100.0	0.0
Other	0.0	0.0
Independents	16.7	14.4
Total	**22.2**	**33.3**

INCUMBENTS AND NON-INCUMBENTS

Globally, incumbency has long been identified as a major barrier to women's equal representation.[88] As they have already established themselves as proven vote-winners, political selectors rarely fail to nominate incumbents who wish to run again.[89] Since men have accounted for the majority of incumbent Dáil candidates to date (and the wider aspirant pool, as **Chapter 1** found), this has restricted opportunities for women to contest elections. **Figure 3** presents the fate of incumbent TDs who contested for their seats between 1992 and 2020. As a whole, low turnover rates show incumbents' advantage with voters relative to non-incumbents, but there are gender differences. At each general election (bar 1992), a higher percentage of men than women retained their seats. This suggests that the incumbency advantage is gendered, being more conditional for women. Even after women TDs have successfully navigated male-gendered candidate selection processes and previous election contests, they face a more competitive environment when seeking to retain their seats.

Figure 3:   Incumbent success rates by gender, 1992–2020 (%)
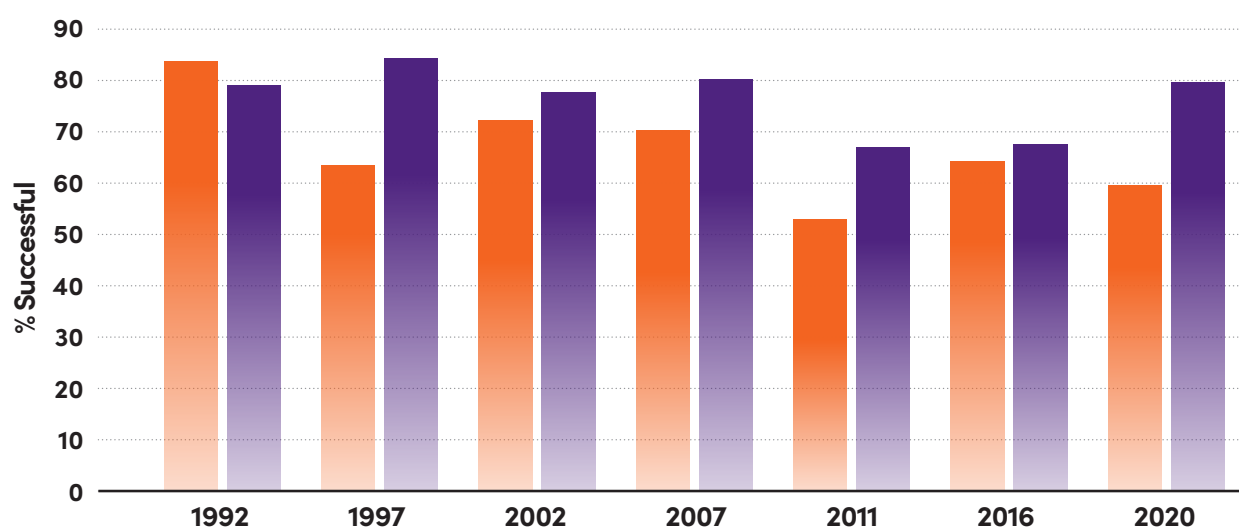
	1992	1997	2002	2007	2011	2016	2020
Women incumbents	88.3	63.2	72.2	70.0	52.9	64.0	59.4
Men incumbents	78.9	84.4	77.5	80.0	66.7	67.5	79.6

Party competition is a key explanatory factor. Over the years, women TDs have been disproportionally impacted when their party experiences a significant drop in national support. This was the case for Labour women in 1997; Fine Gael women in 2002; Fianna Fáil women in 2011; Labour women in 2016; and Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and Labour women in 2020. In all cases, women TDs, including many high-profile names, were less likely to hold onto their seats than their male counterparts. In addition to the political impact of boundary changes (a gender-neutral factor for all candidates), the small number of sitting women TDs, coupled

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88   Schwindt-Bayer, 2005.
89   McGing, 2013.

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with the unpredictability of vote transfers at the constituency level, appears to make women deputies more vulnerable to large-scale vote losses.[90] Additional research on gender and incumbency would be instructive, but this report suggests that having a more gender-balanced cohort of incumbents on the ballot paper would counteract the gendered effects of vote swings on women. Ultimately, this can only be achieved with the increased selection, election and retention of women TDs, especially in the largest parties.

It is also important to consider the patterns of success for non-incumbents; these individuals aspire 'to the prize of incumbency.'[91] **Figure 4** details the hurdles new candidates have to climb in pursuing a Dáil career – but compared to incumbent candidates, the gender gap is smaller. This is a positive finding in the context of gender quotas, which has resulted in more non-incumbent women on the ballot. Women challengers were more successful than men in 2011, largely due to many unsuccessful male independents.

Figure 4:   Non-incumbent success rates by gender, 1992-2020 (%)
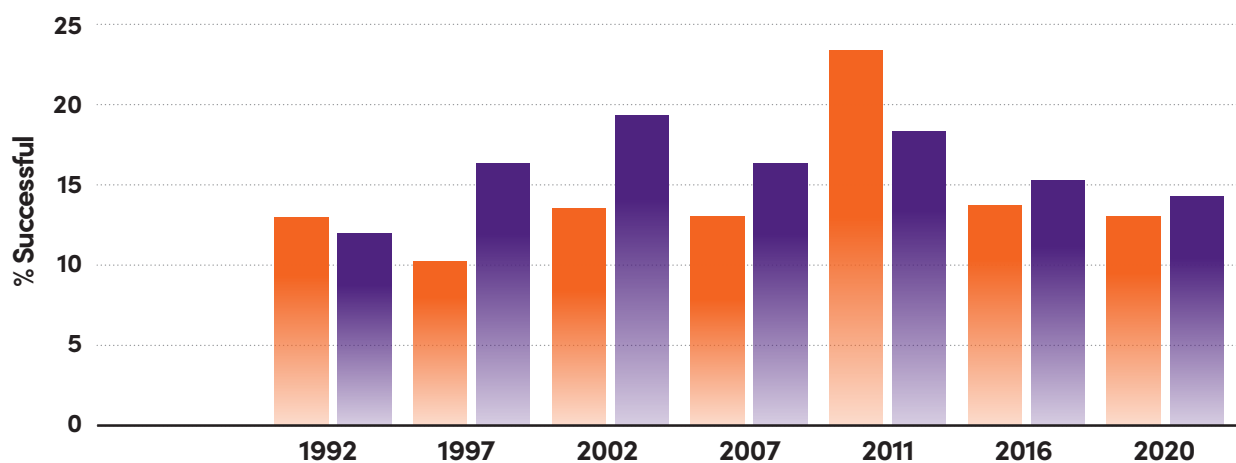
	1992	1997	2002	2007	2011	2016	2020
Women non-incumbents	13.0	10.3	13.4	12.9	23.2	13.8	13.1
Men non-incumbents	12.0	16.2	19.4	16.3	18.3	15.3	14.2

CONSTITUENCY MAGNITUDE

With a fixed number of three to five seats per Dáil constituency[92], the average constituency magnitude in Ireland is low compared to other PR systems. Does this impact women's seat-holding? In political science, the theory goes that party organisations have more opportunities to select and elect women candidates (and members of minority groups) in constituencies with a larger number of seats, as they do not have to displace the (normally male) incumbent(s).[93] Researchers have examined if, in Dáil elections, four- and five-seat constituencies confer an electoral advantage for women compared to three-

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90   Galligan, 2008; Keenan & Brennan, 2021.
91   McGing, 2013, p.336.
92   The Constitution of Ireland specifies that the minimum number of TDs returned for each constituency is three, but does not define the maximum number. *The Electoral Reform Act, 2022*, specifies a maximum number of five TDs.
93   Tremblay, 2008.

seaters, but the findings of these studies have been mixed. Some studies state that three-seat constituencies pose a barrier to women, while others have not found any significant gender differences by constituency size.[94] Methodological differences may explain some of this variance as several studies have focused on single elections with small numbers of women in the data.

For a more rounded assessment, the statistical analysis for this report included all general elections from 1992 to 2020.[95] **Figure 5** shows that women have accounted for a higher percentage of candidates contesting in four- and five-seat constituencies than in three-seat constituencies; however, the difference is not as significant as expected. Women TDs have achieved higher representation levels in five-seat constituencies, though three-seat constituencies had a slightly better record of electing women than four-seaters (**Figure 6**).

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were disaggregated in the analysis, as these parties fielded multiple candidates in most constituencies and had the greatest bearing on women's representation in the period. In the case of Fine Gael, there is evidence of a constituency magnitude effect, with the percentage of women candidates selected by the party considerably higher in four- and five-seat constituencies (**Figure 5**). While the differences are narrower, these districts have also elected a higher percentage of Fine Gael women TDs over the years (**Figure 6**). In Fianna Fáil, five-seat constituencies have similarly reported a larger percentage of women nominees, but three-seat constituencies have actually been better for the recruitment of women than four-seaters. Regarding seat-winning, three-seat constituencies have returned a notably larger proportion of women TDs for Fianna Fáil.

**Figure 5:   Candidate success rates by gender, 1992–2020 (%)**
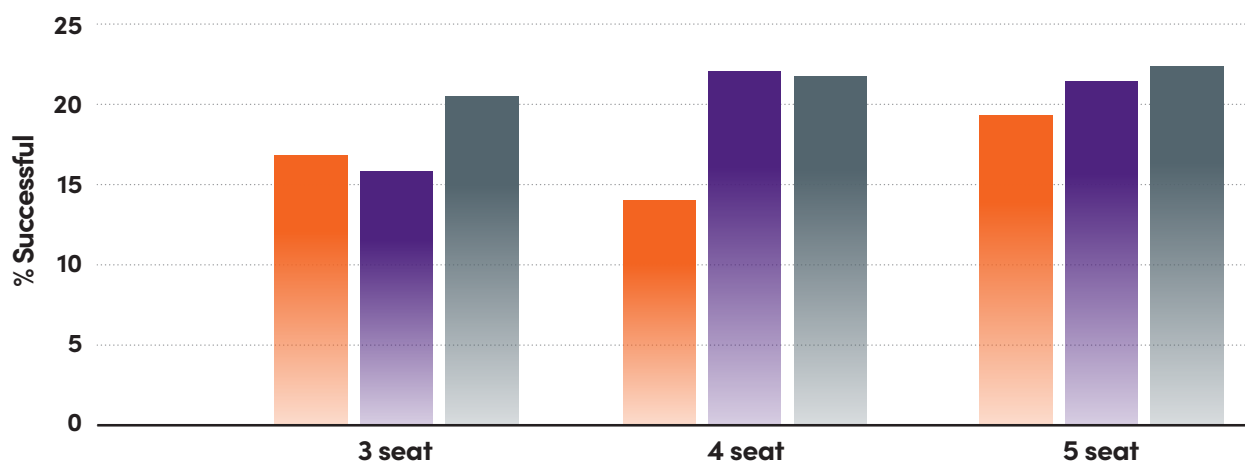
	3 seat	4 seat	5 seat
Fianna Fáil	16.7	13.8	19.3
Fine Gael	15.7	21.9	21.3
All Candidates	20.3	21.6	22.4

94   For an overview of this literature, see McGing, 2013.
95   The Ceann Comhairle has been excluded from the analysis as the office-holder is automatically returned.

Figure 6:   Candidate success rates by gender, 1992–2020 (%)

	3 seat	4 seat	5 seat
Fianna Fáil	13.6	7.6	8.1
Fine Gael	12.2	13.9	14.1
All Candidates	15.3	14.8	17
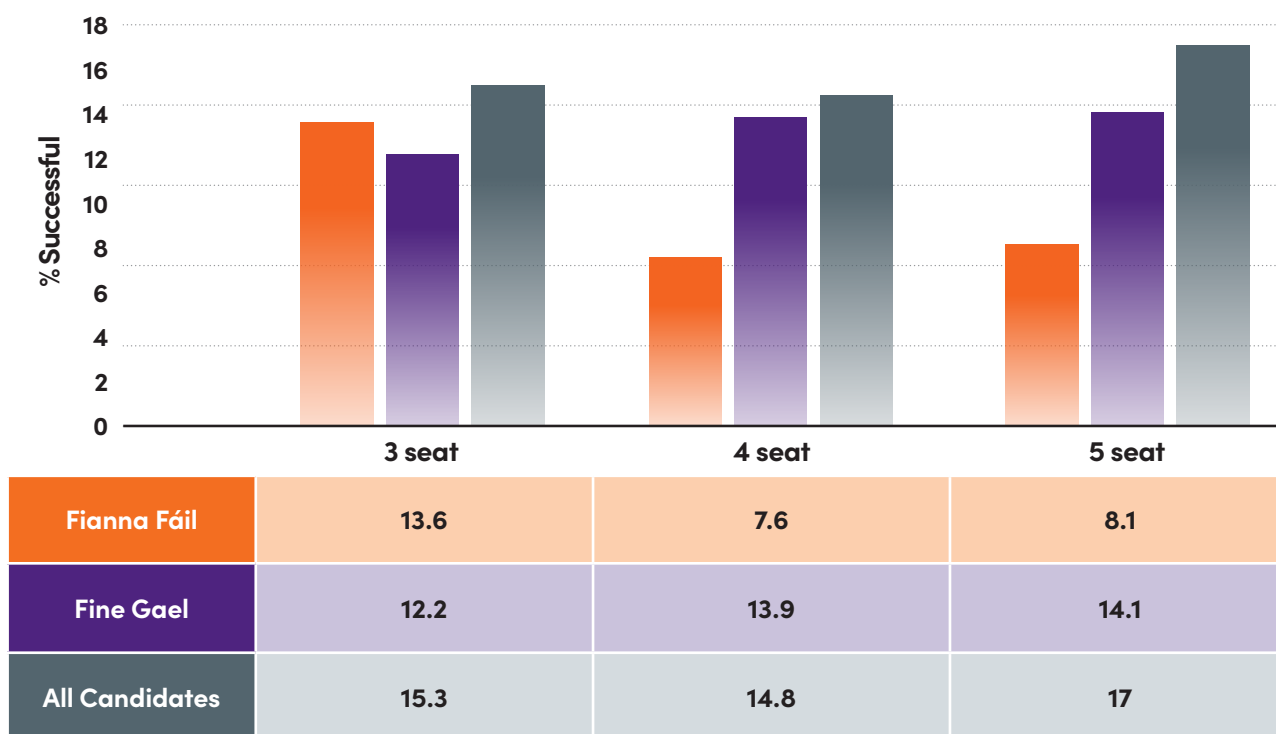
These findings support calls from political reformers to increase the size of Dáil constituencies, especially given the extent of the boundary changes and growth in seat numbers that will be required to respond to future population changes.[96] Notably, as part of the Constituency Review Report 2023, the Electoral Commission has committed to commissioning research on the possibility of Dáil constituencies with more than five seats.[97] It is critical that this analysis includes a strong gender lens. While constituency magnitude does not influence women's Dail representation to the extent the political science literature would suggest – practically, the effect is strongly mediated by individual political parties' strategies[98] – this report finds that three-seat constituencies are less favourable to women than those electing four and five members. With the gender quota threshold rising to 40% at the next general election, parties should seek to utilise larger constituencies as an enabling tool for effective quota implementation, while simultaneously ensuring that new women are selected to run in winnable seats and not just to 'make up the numbers' alongside a preferred candidate.[99] Further, as they are more proportional, larger constituencies would ensure that smaller parties, who tend to run a higher proportion of women candidates, have a greater prospect of winning Dáil seats.

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[96]   Kavanagh, 2023.
[97]   Electoral Commission, 2023.
[98]   McGing, 2013.
[99]   Mariani et al, 2020.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Once women are *selected* as candidates, they must be *elected* to meaningfully advance gender equality in parliament. An increase in the number of women candidates on the ballot paper does not necessarily equate with a corresponding increase in women's representation, with various factors influencing electoral success.

Drawing from a comprehensive statistical dataset of all Irish general elections between 1992 and 2020, this chapter unpacked the reasons behind the persistently low presence of women in Dáil Éireann, despite the implementation of legal gender quotas in 2016.

The main research findings are summarised below:

Party organisations are critical in structuring opportunities for women to enter parliament. Women's underrepresentation in the Dáil is inextricably linked to the low proportion of women candidates – and the vast majority of candidates come through the party route. Thus, leadership must come from parties, especially the largest parties, for significant change to occur.

Historically, in Irish general elections, the most electorally dominant forces, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, have selected and elected a lower proportion of women TDs. Their combined electoral strength has created significant challenges to the advancement of women's representation at the national level. On the other hand, the representation of women TDs in smaller and minor parties has, at times, been notable.

Importantly, research on recent general elections finds no evidence of a negative gender bias against women candidates. Women are receiving more first preference votes than ever before, increasing at each election. Despite this, apart from 2011, men have been more successful in converting their candidacy to a seat. Sucess rates for women have actually dropped since the implementation of gender quotas in 2016.

Gendered success rates vary by political affiliation and election year. There is some evidence of women being recruited to run for unwinnable seats, in some cases as 'sweepers' to meet quota requirements but with minimal time to mount a campaign.

The incumbency advantage is more conditional for women than men. Women face a more competitive environment when seeking to hold onto their seats, namely after a national decline in voter support for their party.

Regardless of gender, non-incumbents face a very competitive environment in their pursuit of elected office, registering low success rates across the board. The odds of election for non-incumbent women are lower than for men, but the gender gap in recent elections has been minimal. This is a positive finding in the context of gender quota implementation going forward.

In general, four- and five-seat constituencies are more facilitating of women's representation than three-seaters, but the behaviour of individual parties mediates the gendered effect of constituency magnitudes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the report findings, the evidenced-based measures below would help advance the selection and election of women TDs for the Dáil.

FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

To create a pipeline of politically experienced women aspirants/candidates for the Dáil, work to increase the number of women running for, and elected to, local government in the 2024 local elections.

Maximise the number of women candidates selected to run in general elections; this is especially important for the largest parties to have the greatest impact on women's representation nationally. This should exceed the minimum quota threshold of 40%, but without resorting to recruiting women as 'sweeper' candidates.

Restrict the use of gender directives to constituencies as far as is practicable, instead prioritising the selection of women through open conventions; if directives are required to meet quota requirements, notice of the gender directive should be given as far as possible in advance of the selection convention, to avoid any potential conflict between party HQ and party members.

Increase the number of women selected to run for winnable seats, with party HQ and party members in the constituency actively working together to pursue this goal.

Ensure that supports are in place to orientate new candidates, including adequate time between selection, the campaign and election day.

Provide support for unsuccessful women candidates in the aftermath of a general election, including outgoing TDs (debrief and supports to maintain engagement with party politics).

Put succession plans in place at the constituency level for when vacancies arise on the ticket (for example, when an incumbent TD retires), using this as an opportunity to develop aspiring women candidates and members of minority groups.

After each general election, conduct a gender audit of successful and unsuccessful candidates to assess learnings and implement future actions.

Monitor the gender breakdown of those who withdraw ahead of selection conventions (aspirant withdrawals) or before the election (candidate withdrawals).

FOR GOVERNMENT

Facilitate the Electoral Commission to collate intersectional data on aspirants, candidates and elected TDs across all equality grounds, based on voluntary self-disclosure.[100] A report should be published after each general election.

Amend the Electoral Reform Act 2022 to change the terms of reference for the Constituency Review process, allowing the Electoral Commission to recommend six-seat constituencies (or larger). Minimise the number of smaller, and hence less proportional, three-seaters.

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[100] See Centenary Action Group, 2020.

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