

‘An Unfinished Democracy’: Gender and Political Representation in the Republic of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Ireland's Decade of Centenaries, beginning in 2012, has seen the commemoration of a period of significant social and political transformation. For scholars of gender and politics, it also provides the opportunity to take stock of women's path to greater political representation (ultimately aided by the introduction of a candidate gender quota in 2016) and to highlight key areas where more work needs to be done in order to understand how women can enjoy greater inclusion and participation, as well as representation of their interests, going forward. This symposium provides an overview of what we know about the causes of women's underrepresentation in Irish political life so far, before addressing some of these areas where our understanding is as yet underdeveloped. In doing so, it contributes to the developing knowledge of the Irish case. Overall, the symposium highlights diverse forms of women's political participation in the Republic of Ireland.

KEYWORDS Ireland; gender and politics; representation; political participation

INTRODUCTION

2022 marks one hundred years since the establishment of the Irish Free State and comes towards the end of a Decade of Centenaries that began in 2012 in order to commemorate a transformative period in Ireland's history. The years 1912–1923 saw a huge upheaval in social and political terms for the island of Ireland, as well as seeing important changes in the status of women. Women were accorded the right to vote in 1918, at least women over the age of 30 who met minimum property or educational qualifications - and that year's election saw two female candidates being fielded. Constance Markievicz was successfully elected and would go on to sit in the first Dáil in 1919, becoming one of the first women in the world to be appointed to cabinet and the first woman to hold the post of Minister for Labour (which included responsibility for social welfare).

The centenary celebrations have sought to bring women's contributions to politics in Ireland to the fore by hosting events such as a conference directly addressing the issue of women's participation in electoral politics (entitled 'Politics Needs Women' and held at the Conference Centre in 2018) and creating a pop-up museum exhibition celebrating '100 years of Women in Politics and Public Life' which opened in Dublin Castle before touring the country. While such events seek to highlight women's contribution, they do so chiefly by focussing on a handful of remarkable women who have made their mark in political life. What is perhaps more remarkable is the extent to which women's participation was marginalised over much of the period. Despite the political gains made by women in early Dáil elections, they were soon 'faded out' of politics in the post-revolutionary era. Furthermore, of the small number of women TDs to take seats, the majority were relatives of men who died while in office; another indication of the highly gendered and localised political system that took hold following the establishment of the Irish Free State (McGing, 2020).

It took seven decades after the Irish Free state was established for the share of women in Dáil Éireann to reach double digits. But it subsequently plateaued for another two decades, hovering between 12 and 15 percent, before the introduction of a candidate gender quota caused it to jump to more than 22 percent. This long period where women's numeric representation in the Dáil was at a low level, coupled with the presence of features in the Irish political system that should nominally support their presence, has given rise to a body of research that has sought to understand why this should have been the case and why a policy intervention was required to tackle the issue.

Norris' (1993, 1997) model of legislative recruitment constitutes a systematic way of modelling the determinants of women's underrepresentation, layering them in a funnel of causality that moves from the political system (legal regulations, electoral and party systems) which works to set the context at the country-level, to the party-level variation (both organisational and ideological), that provides the context within which the demand for female candidates (by gatekeepers to the political system) will interact with the supply of those candidates (i.e. those that will put themselves forward to run). These different layers constitute possible sites of resistance to women's equal participation in electoral politics.

Analysis of cross-country variation indicates the importance of cultural and socio-economic explanatory factors. Consistently, high levels of female labour force participation, high levels of economic development, and cultural attitudes that favour the participation of women in the public rather than the domestic sphere are found to be positively associated with an increased share of women in legislative bodies (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Matland, 1998; Norris & Inglehart, 2001, 2005; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). These are features that have been present in the Republic of Ireland for a number of decades.

It is true that Ireland is still a majority Catholic country (more than 78 percent of the population identified as part of that denomination in the 2016 Census [CSO, 2017]) but this figure has been steadily declining since its peak in 1961. In addition, as Reynolds (1999) has found, the impact of Catholicism (as a proxy for traditional values) on the share of women in parliament is indistinguishable from that of other Christian denominations. Ireland has also enjoyed a high level of economic development and rising female labour force participation rate which in 2020 was four points above the EU average (World Bank, 2022). It is fair to say then that such country-level variables fail to provide an adequate explanation for the low numbers of women in Dáil Éireann.

The Irish electoral system, proportional representation using a single transferrable vote (PR-STV), does provide a partial explanation for women's underrepresentation in Irish politics. Cross-nationally, higher district magnitudes are positively associated with higher levels of women's representation in the legislature (Darcy, Welch, & Clark, 1994; Lakeman, 1994; Matland & Studlar, 1996; Reynolds, 1999) and this has been found to be the case across constituencies in the Republic of Ireland with the largest constituencies (five seats) being more likely to field and elect women candidates than are the smallest (three seats) (Engstrom, 1987), though we should note that the trend has been to see an increase in district magnitude over time (McGing, 2013). In addition, due to its ballot structure – described as the most open ballot structure of all by Farrell (2011) – which allows voters to choose between candidates of the same party, STV provides candidates with an incentive to cultivate a personal vote and for parties to reselect candidates who bring with them this large personal vote. The system thus conveys an important incumbency advantage (Galligan, 1993) which prevents women from being selected. Despite this important limitation, STV is better for women's representation than

a majoritarian electoral system would be (White, 2006). Therefore, its limitations can only be a partial explanation in the Irish case.

The party system, as well as differences across political parties in ideological terms provide other partial explanations for why women's numeric representation in Dáil Éireann has been so low. Multi-party systems make it possible for smaller parties to emerge and enjoy electoral success. Such parties tend to be more hospitable to women's political participation than parties that are larger and featuring institutionalised incumbents' interests (Galligan, 1993; McGing, 2013). In addition, left-wing political parties (Caul, 1999, 2001; Lovenduski, 1993) and parties with a centralised organisational structure (Caul, 1999) tend to have a positive impact on women's numeric representation. While the Irish party system features multiple political parties, some of which have been small and on the left of the political spectrum, Irish politics has been dominated by two political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, since the early days of the Irish Free State, with both being located on the centre right of the political spectrum (Castles & Mair, 1984; Huber & Inglehart, 1995).

Further, though it has enjoyed success as a junior coalition partner, the Irish Labour Party is much smaller than other social democratic parties in other countries with the result that the Left in Ireland is particularly weak in comparative terms (Mair, 2001). In addition, while the selection process by political parties is relatively centralised in theory (Farrell, 1999; Gallagher, 1988; Lundell, 2004), it is clear that parties did not prioritise fielding a diverse slate of candidates until relatively recently (Lakeman, 1994). And even then, these parties tended to adopt promotional and rhetorical strategies to encourage women to put themselves forward rather than implementing more effective measures, such as adopting targets (Buckley, 2013). The cumulative effect has been that the two main political parties have been comparatively slow to recruit women (McGing, 2013) and the smaller parties, some of which are on the Left, have not had the positive impact across much of the period that we would expect (Galligan, 1993).

At the lowest level of Norris' model of legislative recruitment, we can consider whether there is a supply of women who are willing to run for office and whether there is demand for them to do so. With respect to the demand for female candidates by voters, the existing evidence is that the Irish electorate is not systematically biased against female candidates (Keenan & Brennan, 2021; McElroy & Marsh, 2010, 2011). With respect to party selectors, we have already mentioned the importance of incumbency, but there is also evidence that the informal criteria selectors employ is itself gendered. Selectors appear to have a preference for particular kinds of candidates; that is, those with strong local ties and name recognition, as well as, ideally, being political powerbrokers – all of which are characterisations more likely to be applied to men than to women (Culhane, 2017).

Finally, with respect to the supply side of the equation, we know that in Ireland local politics represents an important pipeline into Dáil Éireann (Buckley, Mariani, McGing, & White, 2015; Reidy, 2011; Weeks & Quinlivan, 2009) but women are underrepresented there too as they are at the national level. This effect is not offset by their overrepresentation among another pipeline professions; for the Dáil, the largest occupational grouping is composed of members or former members of the teaching profession (they made up one fifth of Teachta Dála in the 31st Dáil) (Collins, 2011). And while women comprise 87 and 71 percent of primary and secondary school teachers respectively (CSO, 2016), they do not appear to have been able to translate their dominance in this pipeline profession into representation in the legislature. We should note also that cross-nationally, existing research indicates that as well as having access to useful

social networks, of the kind provided by the pipeline professions, time availability and access to financial resources are likely to impact on willingness to run (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993). Where access to such resources is gendered, we can expect fewer women to put themselves forward as candidates. Traditional sex-role socialisation (Clark, 1991; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010) is also likely to matter since it impacts women's assessment of their qualifications to run and likelihood of success (Fox & Lawless, 2005). We should note, however, that there is scope for in-depth examination of these supply-side factors in the Irish context.

Taken together, this existing body of work indicates that the key cause of women's underrepresentation in the Republic of Ireland is Irish political parties and this explains the implementation of the candidate gender quota for the first time at the 2016 general election. This quota required political parties to ensure that at least 30 percent of their candidates were women otherwise they would lose half of their state funding for the term of the parliament. Although this quota was controversial when it came into effect, attracting support from the usual suspects (women, feminists, and those on the left of the political spectrum) among both voters and elites (Keenan & McElroy, 2017), it is clear that its introduction can be regarded as a success for civic society groups which successfully took advantage of an appetite for political reform and managed to secure crucial elite support (Buckley, 2013).

It is clear that the quota has been a success; Dáil Éireann saw an increase of the percentage of female TDs by seven points in a single election. Buckley, Mariani, and White (2014) argued prior to its implementation that such success would be possible so long as political parties embraced the measure by selecting women and by running them where they can win rather than fielding them in seats that are unwinnable. It is clear that political parties did largely embrace the quota, but some pockets of resistance remain (Brennan & Buckley, 2017; Mariani, Buckley, McGing, & Wright, 2021) and it will likely require a number of electoral cycles before the quota is fully embedded (Buckley, Galligan, & McGing, 2016).

Nevertheless, 100 years on from the establishment of the Irish Free State, it is clear that significant progress has been made at the national level with respect to the issue of women's numeric representation. However, the centenary provides the opportunity to reflect on some of the important gaps in this existing literature. As we have discussed, the core focus of this work – with the exception of some more recent research on electoral politics at the local level (e.g. Buckley & Hofman, 2015) - has been on Dáil Éireann. This is of course due to its importance as a legislative body but also due to its role as the pool from which the cabinet is drawn, nevertheless there remains significant scope to investigate the gendered nature of local electoral politics. In addition, most of the literature that seeks to understand political recruitment in the Republic of Ireland focuses on the characteristics of the electoral system, variation across political parties, and the demands of gatekeepers.

However, very little is known about the circumstances under which women will put themselves forward to run for office; there is an important gap in the literature with respect to the supply-side of the equation. Finally, with some notable exceptions (for example, Connolly's [2013] work on portfolio allocation in the Oireachtas, or Baumann, Debus, and Müller's (2015) paper examining TDs' positions in debates on abortion), this body of work is chiefly concerned with women's numeric representation (i.e. the share of women in a given representative body), rather than focussing on their behaviour after they have been elected. In particular, we know very little about the extent to which women who have been elected in Ireland will go on to represent women's interests in substantive terms. This is in contrast to the gender and politics literature on many other political systems where scholarship has increasingly shifted from

‘counting’ women in politics to assessing the extent to which they ‘make a difference’ (Celis & Childs, 2021).

This symposium aims to speak to some of these gaps that this review has identified. In doing so, it contributes to developing our knowledge with respect to the way that women’s interests are represented in Irish society, the way that women will behave after they have been elected, and the extent to which women’s path to candidacy is gendered.

Keenan and McElroy’s contribution examines the gender differences in encouragement to run for office received by candidates at the 2019 Irish local elections. Receiving encouragement to run can be an important predictor of whether an individual will do so, therefore investigating gendered patterns can help us to understand the circumstances under which women may (or may not) put themselves forward. Using an original dataset (the 2019 Local Election Candidate Study) the authors find that encouragement to run is gendered; with women who run for office having received more encouragement and also having been more likely to have received such encouragement from specific sources.

McGing’s contribution examines the development of caucuses by women councillors in Irish local government in the wake of the 2017 launch of a caucus for women members of the Oireachtas. The research utilised a multi-method approach to undertake a rich, gendered assessment of the factors which enable and constrain the establishment and operations of caucuses for women councillors and it places a particular focus on the first local caucuses established in the country (Limerick City and County [2019] and Dublin City [2020]). Local government in Ireland provides a unique opportunity to support such an investigation as partisanship is less significant than it is at the national level. The research illuminates the circumstances under which we can expect locally elected women of different parties and ideologies to come together in order to cooperate. Enabling circumstances include a high level of interest and gender consciousness among women councillors – with new women identified as key players – and the presence of a caucus entrepreneur and a dedicated secretariat. Importantly, the study demonstrates how geographical differences in women’s representation impact on caucuses, and posits that caucus structures are not necessarily feminist or intersectional spaces. The article makes an important contribution to global research in this area which tends to focus on caucuses in national parliaments.

Finally, Field’s contribution considers the role that deliberative democracy has played in representing women. Since 2011, with the We the Citizens project, Ireland began to establish itself as a world leader in the use of national deliberative fora for considering policy change. These fora were used to influence the marriage equality referendum of 2015 and the abortion referendum of 2018, with a Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality being held in 2020 and 2021 to directly tackle the issues relating to women’s position in Irish society. Field assesses the extent the involvement and influence of women in Ireland’s deliberative processes and their contribution to the country’s ongoing social transformation, particularly with respect to their record of delivering so-called ‘woman-friendly’ outcomes.

Collectively, the three articles in the symposium contribute to our understanding of women’s participation and representation in political life 100 years after the Irish Free State was first established. In different ways, they draw attention to sites where this understanding is as yet underdeveloped and where there exist fruitful areas of inquiry.

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