

Women in Politics: Elections

I: Introduction

In the 2011 Irish general election, 25 female TDs were elected to Dáil Éireann, a slight increase on the 22 elected in 2007. By international standards, the percentage of Irish female representatives (15%) is rather low and only a handful of other EU countries have fewer women elected to their national parliaments (Hungary, Romania, Cyprus and Malta). Furthermore, there has been no breakthrough in representation at the local level, with just 16 per cent of the seats in the city and county council elections of 2009 being won by women.

Interestingly, there has been no major increase in female representation in Ireland in the past two decades, despite very significant social change and increased female labour force participation.¹ Other European countries, which in the past have had similarly low levels of female representation, have overtaken Ireland in recent years. For instance, in 1992 there were 60 women (9% of the total) in the UK House of Commons but there are now 143 (22%), while 27 per cent of those elected to the French Parliament in 2012 were women, up from eleven per cent in 1997.

II: Why are the numbers of women TDs so low?

There are a whole variety of different reasons put forward as to why there may be so few women elected to public office in Ireland.

- 1) **Women run for the wrong parties:** Women generally run for the smaller parties, which by definition are less successful in elections. For example, in 2011 the Labour Party and Sinn Féin had the highest number of female candidates amongst their ranks, at 25 and 20 per cent respectively. Women comprised only 15 per cent of candidates for both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.
- 2) **Incumbency Advantage:** Most sitting TDs are men and incumbents have rather high re-election rates in the Republic of Ireland. Parties naturally want to nominate incumbents given their good chances of winning. It is not about the sex of the candidate per se, just their incumbency status.

¹ In the 1992 general election, 12% of successful candidates were women.

- 3) **Parties don't nominate women.** Related to point 2, but this argument also further suggest that parties systematically discriminate (either consciously or unconsciously) against women when it comes to nominating candidates for election. For instance, recruitment at the local level may happen in rather male environs such as GAA clubs. The argument is that women are not seen as viable candidates by parties and are less visible to party selectors overall. This argument does not fully explain however, why Ireland is so low in international rankings, as this is not an exclusively Irish problem.

- 4) **Women don't come forward:** International research on the decision to run for office does indicate that women rule themselves out of the political game more frequently than men. There is a gender gap in levels of political ambition. Women are much less likely to see themselves as qualified to run (even when by objective standards they are). The reasons for this are complex, in part it may be socialization or it may be that women are more risk adverse than men. Women are more likely than men to perceive the electoral environment as highly competitive and biased against female candidates. Though again, lower levels of political ambition are not peculiar to Irish women and do not in themselves explain our particularly low rates of female participation.

- 5) **The voters are to blame:** Conventional wisdom, often repeated in the Irish media, is that Irish voters won't vote for women or Irish women won't vote for female candidates. However, there is no systematic evidence to support this popular claim. Research on Ireland can find no evidence that women candidates are disadvantaged by their gender. This conclusion reflects research in other advanced industrialized democracies (e.g. the USA, Canada, the UK) where it has been established that, if anything, women candidates actually have an advantage with voters. There may be a very small number of voters who do prefer candidates of one gender but this is relatively balanced between the sexes. There is very little indication that gender is a deciding factor when Irish people cast their ballots.

- 6) ***Irish Culture is paternalistic and traditional.*** This is an idea put forth largely by outside observers but also highlighted by the “50:50 Group” in their submission to the Convention. It doesn’t take account of the sea change in Irish society in recent decades. It also does not adequately explain the increase in numbers of women members of parliament in countries with very similar cultures and traditions, such as Spain.² Women across the world are typically still responsible for the majority of childcare and household tasks and this in itself does act as an obstacle to running for office, but it is not a peculiarly Irish phenomenon.
- 7) ***Irish political life is not compatible with family life.*** Being a TD is more than a full time job, work-life balance is hard to establish, the hours are long and the demands on one’s time are many. Irish voters expect their TDs to be personally available to answer their demands. On the other hand, political life is demanding almost everywhere and the need to cultivate a personal vote and keep constituents onside is not exclusive to the Irish system.
- 8) ***Lack of gender quotas.*** Most of the countries with high numbers of women in their national parliaments have quotas of one form or another (17 of the top 20 ranked countries internationally).

Undoubtedly, the introduction of quotas goes some way in explaining the rapid increases in women’s representation in nations such as Rwanda. But the effectiveness of quotas varies quite dramatically. In Scandinavian countries the surge in women elected to public office predated the introduction of quotas (and indeed in Scandinavia, quotas are still largely voluntary, implemented at party level).³

- 9) ***Nature of the Electoral System?*** Generally proportional representation (PR) systems are viewed as being kind to women candidates. However, the Single

² As early as 1996 Spain already had 24 per cent of women MPs. Currently some 36% of Spanish MPs are women.

³ The Electoral Reform Act of 2011 does introduce a gender quota for future Irish elections. 30% of a party’s candidates must be women (or men).

Transferable Vote (STV), with its emphasis on cultivating a personal vote, may be off putting to women. In the Republic of Ireland, elections are much more candidate centred than in other European PR systems and this aspect of campaigns may be particularly unattractive to women (see point 4 above). International research indicates that women react more negatively to campaigning elements such as having to raise their own money and going door to door to meet constituents. The personal element of the Irish electoral system may be a particular deterrent to women coming forward. The submission to the constitutional convention by Mr. Diarmuid Lynch (Dec 24 2012) makes specific reference to the nature of the STV as an obstacle to greater participation by women in Irish political life.

III Does it Matter?

Does it really matter that TDs are not a microcosm of society in terms of things like gender, class or age? Public opinion research has found that Irish voters generally seem to think having more women (and young people) in the Dáil would be a good thing. However, they don't seem to care too much whether their own constituency TDs are of the same gender as them. Nonetheless, the majority of the submissions to the Constitutional Convention (as of the 11th of February) on the topic of Women in Politics do call for action.

Arguments in favour of the adoption of electoral/constitutional quotas:

- i) Female TDs may better understand the needs of women constituents
- ii) Female TDs may be better able to communicate with women voters
- iii) More women in parliament will generate greater trust in the quality of our democracy. Research generally finds that the greater the representation of women in parliament, the lower the level of corruption.
- iv) More women in positions of political power may inspire other women and influence younger women through a role model effect
- v) Actively encouraging women to participate in politics will lead to a bigger pool of potential candidates, this will lead to an overall improvement in the quality of our elected representatives.

- vi) More women in parliament will lead to a different more consensual (friendly) style of politics and the introduction of new and different types of legislation.

Arguments against gender quotas:

- i) Most women TDs don't see themselves as representing women, they are party people, first and foremost.
- ii) There really is no such thing as women's interests; women are too diverse to be considered as a group.
- iii) Why should gender be privileged over other identities such as ethnicity or age?
- iv) Liberal democracies such as ours are about the rights of citizens as individuals not as members of particular groups.
- v) The policy is discriminatory and undermines the principle of merit.
- vi) The proportion of women in the Dáil will increase over time in a natural, incremental fashion.
- vii) Quotas do not deal with the real causes of women's underrepresentation (e.g the burden of child care) and these should be addressed more directly.

Appendix I: Some Background Data on Women in Elections

Figure 1: Female Candidates and TDs since 1948.

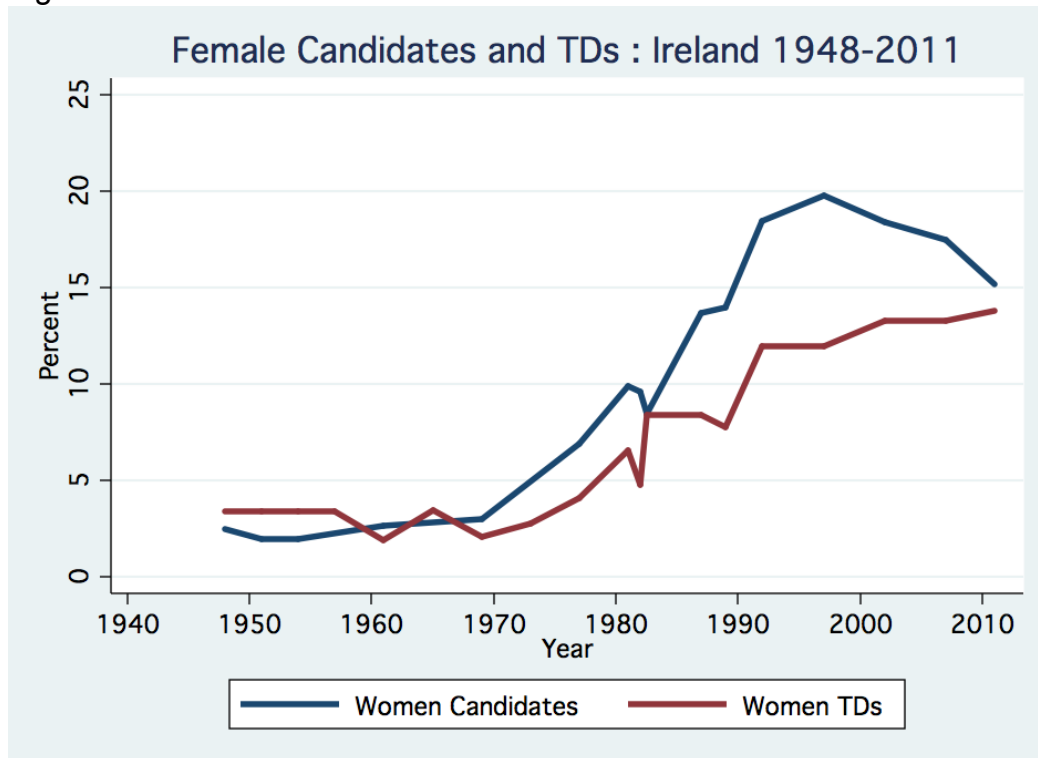


Figure 2: Candidate by party in the 2011 General Election:

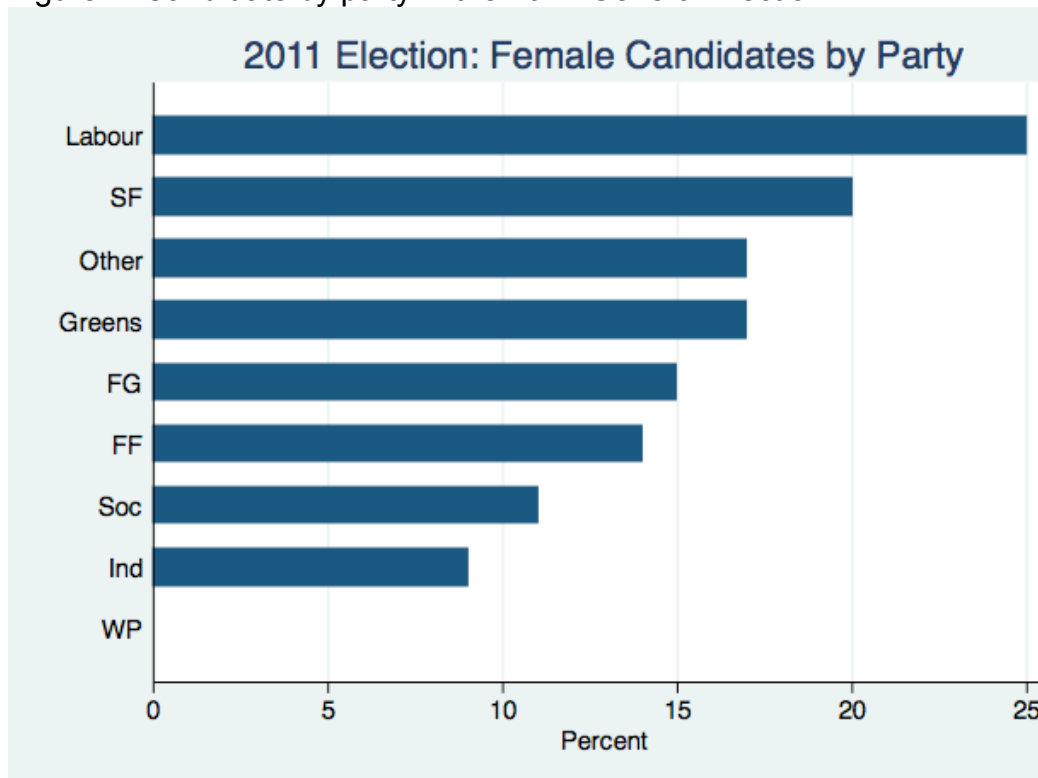
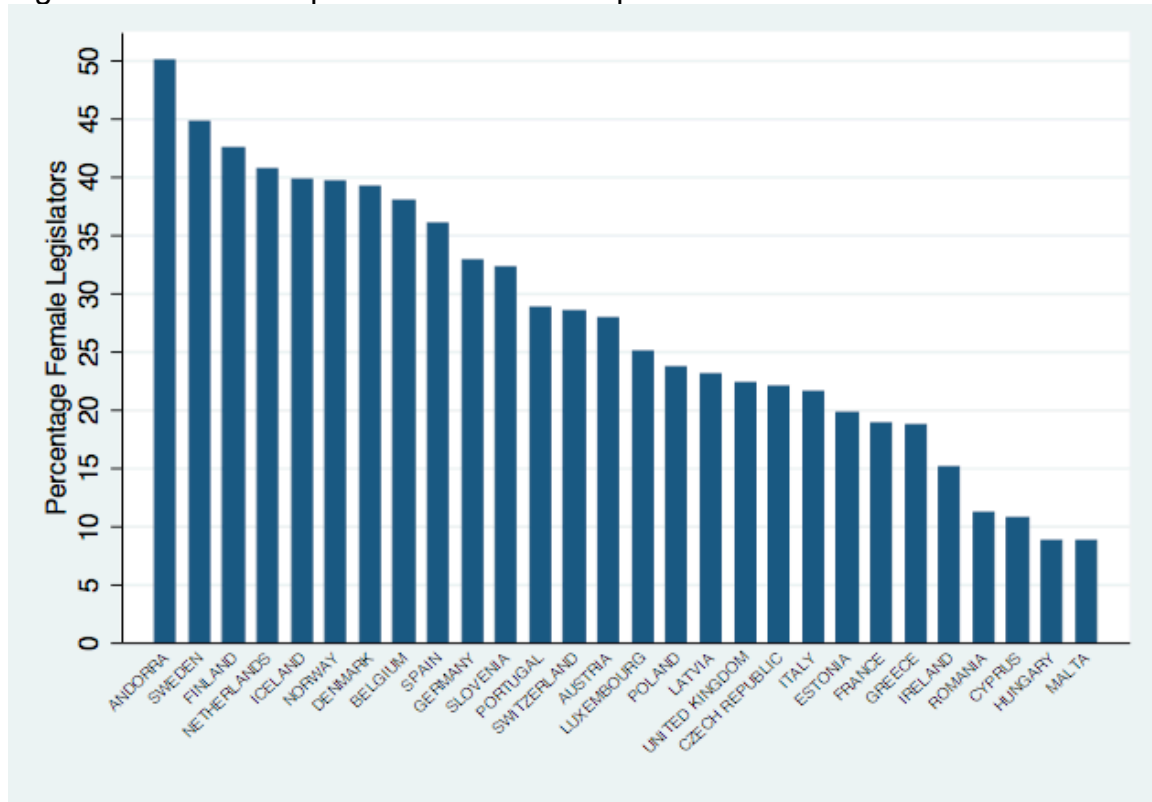


Figure 3: Ireland compared with other European Countries.



Appendix 2: Constitutions and the Role of Women in Politics

Constitutionally defined gender quotas, or constitutional references to the role of women in political life, are unusual in Europe.⁴ France and Serbia are among the very few countries that reference women as elected officials in their constitutions. And no European constitution currently makes a provision for reserving a set number of parliamentary seats for women, a practice that has recently been introduced in some African and Asian countries e.g. Rwanda, Pakistan. Many constitutions do, however, have an explicit clause that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender (and race etc.)

Examples of constitutions with clauses on Women in Political Life

i) In 2008, a review of the French constitution of 1958 was undertaken, with the goal of modernizing France's political institutions. Amongst several other changes, Article 1 of the Preamble of the constitution was amended to include the phrase:

“Statutes shall promote equal access by women and men to elective offices and posts as well as to positions of professional and social responsibility”.

ii) The Serbia constitution of 2006 specifies that:

The State shall guarantee the equality of women and men and develop equal opportunities policy. Art 15.

In the National Assembly, equality and representation of different genders and members of national minorities shall be provided, in accordance with Law. Art 100.

iii) While the Greek Constitution of 1975 explicitly prohibits gender discrimination in article 4(2), Article 116(2) of the constitution specifies that:

‘Positive measures aiming at promoting equality between men and women do not constitute discrimination on grounds of sex. The State shall take measures to eliminate inequalities existing in practice, in particular those detrimental to women.’

This article is generally interpreted as obliging the legislature (and other state bodies) to take positive measures in favour of the promotion of women, where they are underrepresented.

⁴ The Irish constitution (Art. 16.1.1) does make a particular reference to the fact that no one should be excluded from running for Dáil Éireann on the basis of gender: “Every citizen without distinction of sex who has reached the age of twenty-one years, and who is not placed under disability or incapacity by this Constitution or by law, shall be eligible for membership of Dáil Éireann”.

iv) An example of a very specific reserved seat provision is provided by the Rwandan constitution of 2003:

..24 seats (of 80) in the Chamber of Deputies [are] reserved for women. Two from each province and the City of Kigali. Art 76:2

As of the 31 December 2012, there were 45 women (and 35 men) in Rwanda's national assembly.

There are currently only two (short) submissions to the Constitutional Convention that specifically address the issue of quotas with one advocating their adoption and the other objecting.

Table 1: Examples of Constitution's with specific reference to gender equality in political life.

Country	Article	Wording	Year
France	1	Statutes shall promote equal access by women and men to elective offices and posts as well as to position of professional and social responsibility.	2008
Serbia	100	In the National Assembly, equality and representation of different genders and members of national minorities shall be provided, in accordance with Law.	2006
Argentina	37:2	Actual equality of opportunity for men and women for elective and political party positions shall be guaranteed by means of positive actions in the regulation of political parties and in the electoral system.	1994
Ecuador	65	The State shall promote equality with respect to the representation of women and men in publicly appointed or elected office, in its executive and decision-making institutions, and political parties and movements. As for candidacies in multi-person elections, their participation shall be respected by rotation of power and sequencing. The State shall adopt affirmative action measures to guarantee the participation of discriminated sectors.	2008
Ecuador	116	For multi-person elections, the law shall establish an electoral system in line with the principles of proportionality, equality of vote, equity, parity and rotation of power between women and men and shall determine the voting precincts inside and outside the country.	2008
Rwanda (Reserved seats)	9:4	"..women are granted at least thirty per cent of posts in decision making organs."	2003
Rwanda (Reserved seats)	76:2	24 seats (of 80) in the Chamber of Deputies reserved for women. Two from each province and the City of Kigali.	2003