

## Women and the 2016 General Election in Ireland

The introduction of gender quotas at the 2016 general election saw more women than ever put themselves forward for candidate selection. The *Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012* incentivises political parties to select at least 30 per cent female candidates and at least 30 per cent male candidates. A total of 551 candidates contested the election, 388 men (70.4 per cent) and 163 women (29.6 per cent). Although parties expressed concern over where they would ‘find’ women candidates prior to the election, all parties surpassed the 30 per cent threshold as shown in Table 1.

Across the four main political parties of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour and Sinn Féin a total of 155 selection conventions were held of which 54 were contested. A total of 80 women were selected including 11 selected via a gender directive and 20 added-on by party headquarters, as were 14 men. As such the majority of women candidates came through the convention without the use of a gender directive. Masculinised cultural legacies, both internal and external to political parties, resulted in claims that ‘unqualified’ and ‘unmeritorious’ women were being selected by political parties to meet the quota. Yet male meritocracy and experience were rarely questioned. If merit is measured solely by electoral experience, then the quality of women candidates in this election dispels the myth that quotas resulted in the selection of ‘unqualified’ women. The vast majority of party women candidates, like their male counterparts, served extensive political apprenticeships. Looking at the larger parties, 85 per cent of Fine Gael women candidates were electorally-experienced, 82 per cent in Fianna Fáil, 78 per cent in Sinn Féin and 100 per cent in Labour. All but two of the women selected through a gender directive were current officer-holders. Of the 20 women added to the ticket by party headquarters, 14 (70 per cent) had prior electoral experience.

It seems that the main achievement of gender quotas was to instil a cultural change within political parties. Party strategists conducted gender-aware recruitment processes, encouraging, equipping and seeking women to run for election. Quotas also appear to have aided the ‘supply’ of potential women candidates. Left-leaning parties were more likely to run higher proportions of women candidates than those on the right and the two longest-established political parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael encountered the most difficulties in implementing the gender quota. Newer political parties such as the Social Democrats and AAA-PBP recorded the highest rates of female candidacy indicating that new parties, free of the gendered legacies of more established ones, are more facilitating of women’s candidacy. That said, the new right-wing party Renua seemed to have had some difficulty in initially getting women to run. Also noteworthy is the increase in the number and proportion of female independent candidates suggesting that the discourse surrounding gender quotas and women in politics may have had a diffusion effect, encouraging women from outside the party to put themselves forward as independent candidates.

Table 1: Women Candidates and TDs

Party	% Female Candidates	% Difference of Candidates 2011-2016	% Female TDs
AAA-PBP	42	↑160	33.3
Fianna Fáil	31	↑100	13.6
Fine Gael	30.7	↑69	14
Green Party	35	↑75	50

Labour	36.1	↓28	28.6
Renua	30.8	-	-
Sinn Féin	36	↑125	13.6
Social Democrats	42.9	-	66.7
Independents	20	↑74	29.4
Others	30	↑800	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>↑90</b>	<b>22</b>

A total of 35 women were elected in the 2016 general election, 16 incumbents and 19 new female TDs. This represents a 40 per cent increase on the number of women elected in 2011. Dáil Éireann now consists of 22 per cent women TDs, the highest proportion of women deputies in the history of the state, though still far from gender parity. In addition, the 19 new women TDs is the highest number of non-incumbent women ever elected in a single Dáil election.

Table 2: Women and Men in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Dáil

Party	Seats			
	Won	Male	Female	% Female
AAA-PBP	6	4	2	33.3
Fianna Fáil	44	38	6	13.6
Fine Gael	50	39	11	22
Green Party	2	1	1	50
Independent Alliance	6	6	0	-
Independents	17	12	5	29.4
Labour	7	5	2	28.6
Renua	-	-	-	-
Sinn Féin	23	17	6	13.6
Social Democrats	3	1	2	66.7
Others	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>22</b>

In recent elections, the general trend has been for male and female candidates to have similar success rates in seat-winning. However, this was not the case in 2016 where 31.4 per cent of males were successful compared to just 21.5 per cent of females. This may be due to so many women being first time national candidates.

Despite winning 26 fewer seats than they did in 2011, Fine Gael elected 11 women TDs in this election. While this was not a numerical increase, it brought the proportion of women TDs in the party from 15 per cent to 22 per cent. Minister Heather Humphreys (Cavan-Monaghan) won the tenth highest vote in the country – the highest of any female candidate - and the second highest in Fine Gael after the Taoiseach. Three Fine Gael women incumbents lost their seats, but this was offset by the election of four new female non-incumbents. Just one woman selected via a gender directive, Cllr Josepha Madigan in Dublin Rathdown, was elected.

The election was disastrous for the Labour Party, who returned only seven TDs, all incumbents. Given their small number, Labour women were disproportionately hit by the large-scale collapse in their party's support. Of the party's thirteen women candidates, only the former Tánaiste and party leader Joan Burton, and cabinet minister Jan O'Sullivan were elected.

Following the 2011 general election Fianna Fáil had no women TDs. In this context the election of five female TDs in 2016 must be considered a huge success, particularly in light of internal controversies surrounding the implementation of gender quotas. Women now comprise 14 per cent of Fianna Fáil TDs. First-time TDs Cllr Mary Butler and Cllr Margaret Murphy-O'Mahony both topped the poll in their constituencies. In the Taoiseach's constituency of Mayo, Cllr Lisa Chambers won a second seat for the party at the expense of Michelle Mulherin, a Fine Gael incumbent candidate. However, Fianna Fáil has no female representation in Dublin. Just one woman selected via a gender directive, Cllr Anne Rabbitte in Galway East, was elected.

The election was a good day for Sinn Féin women, who trebled their number of seats from two to six. Women now account for 26 per cent of Sinn Féin TDs. Incumbent TD and party vice-president Mary Lou McDonald topped the poll in Dublin Central.

After losing all of their seats in 2011, the Green Party elected one female and one male TD in this election. In Dublin Rathdown, the party's deputy leader Cllr Catherine Martin won the final seat at the expense of Alan Shatter, a Fine Gael TD and former cabinet minister. Interestingly, transfers from Fianna Fáil's Senator Mary White were key to Martin's electoral success.

There were mixed fortunes for women in the new political parties. The Social Democrats re-elected their three incumbent TDs and co-leaders, two women and one man. By contrast, Renua, led by Lucinda Creighton TD failed to win any seats in this election. Two of the six AAA-PBP TDs are women. These are incumbent TD Ruth Coppinger and Cllr Bríd Smith.

Five of the 23 independent deputies in the 32nd Dáil are women. Incumbents Clare Daly, Joan Collins and Maureen O'Sullivan were all returned as were Senator Katherine Zappone and Cllr Catherine Connolly. No female Independent Alliance candidate was elected.

There were a number of local 'firsts' for women in this election. History was made in Louth where Cllr Imelda Munster (Sinn Féin) became the first woman TD ever elected in the county. Cllr Margaret Murphy-O'Mahony (Fianna Fáil) was the first female TD ever elected in the Cork South-West constituency as was Cllr Fiona O'Loughlin (Fianna Fáil) in Kildare South. Three of the eight TDs elected in the two Galway constituencies are women. This was a noteworthy result as the county had not previously elected a female TD since Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (Fianna Fáil) in a 1975 by-election (a seat she held until 1997).

As seen in previous elections, an interesting geography of female representation emerged, with urban and commuter-belt constituencies more gender-balanced than rural areas. Of the 35 women TDs, 26 represent a constituency in either Dublin or the rest of Leinster. In addition, eight of the ten constituencies with more than one woman deputy are in these regions. For the first time in election history, every Dublin constituency has female representation. Also notable is the geographical spread in the female vote with women winning 39 per cent of the first preference vote in the Dublin region, followed by the rest of Leinster (25 per cent), Connacht-Ulster (24 per cent) and Munster (15

per cent). The data indicate the continuing presence of an urban/rural divide in terms of women's candidacy, election and support levels.

The gender quota law has represented an important opportunity to confront the masculine status quo of candidate selection processes in Irish elections and address the historical under-representation of women in Irish politics. Women's representation increased by just five per cent points between 1992 and 2011. In one election, women's political representation in Dáil Éireann has risen to 22 per cent, a six percentage point increase. In addition, women candidates won a higher share of the vote than ever before. The quota legislation, despite difficulties, has worked and can be built on in future elections. But it is a case of 'a lot done; more to do'. Political parties must continue to encourage and support women's political candidacies if the number of women parliamentarians is to further increase in future and gender parity in political representation is achieved.

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## **BIOGRAPHIES**

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