

WOMEN'S POLITICAL ROLE IN OLD AND NEW IRELAND: FROM MARGINALIZATION TO GENDER QUOTAS¹

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In historical accounts, there has been a tendency to minimize the role of women in Irish politics. The lack of attention paid to women's contributions to politics is explained somewhat by the fact that few women in Ireland have achieved elected office. The lack of women officeholders in Ireland is partly a reflection of the highly gendered nature of Irish society after independence. During that crucial period, women were allocated primary responsibility for the private sphere and marginalized from public life (Valiulis 101). The marginalization of women from public life in the post-independence period is somewhat ironic, given that the struggle for Irish freedom had temporarily blurred the boundaries between gender roles. Female support was critical to the success of the guerilla warfare efforts of republican activists. In addition, the 1916 Proclamation of Independence committed a sovereign Ireland to equal rights for "every Irishman and Irishwoman" – a step towards gender equality that was quite unusual for the time. In 1918 – the year all British and Irish women over the age of thirty were given the vote – Sinn Féin's Constance Markievicz became the first woman elected to the House of Commons, though she did not take her seat. The 1921 election also saw the election of five female Sinn Féin candidates unopposed.

Despite the success of early Irish female political leaders, and the promises of the Proclamation of Independence, women's access to public life in Ireland was tempered by cultural expectations. Gardiner (79) notes that in the years after independence, "women's domestic role was singled out as their most important contribution to the building of the new State and eventually became, via social custom and legislation, constitutionally guaranteed in the 1937 constitution." Irish political culture was shaped by the joint influences of Catholicism and nationalism and as noted by Buckley, Galligan, and McGing (3) neither of these influences "was particularly empowering of, or for, women." Nationalist men disregarded the promises they had made to women in earlier years. As expressed by Justice Minister Kevin O'Higgins in 1927: "A few words in a Constitution do not wipe out the difference between the sexes, either physical or mental or temperamental or emotional" (McAuliffe 48). Socially conservative attitudes about gender roles remained predominant until recent times, contributing to the marginalization of women from the political sphere (Buckley, Galligan & McGing).

1 We would like to recognize Molly Mariani, who served as a research assistant for this paper and who coded much of the data in our analysis of the 2009 local election.

In the new Irish state, women who joined political parties usually took on supportive background roles: "The legacy of Republican women seems to be reduced to an obscure footnote" (Keiley-Listermann xvi). The small minority of women who did manage to break away from making tea and writing minutes to enter elected political office largely did so following the death of a male relative. The fact that many women parliamentarians in the decades after Irish independence were related to a former (male) officeholder led some scholars to conclude that women candidates were more likely than men to rely on family connections to enter politics (Galligan, "Women in Politics" 264). In party cultures that were hostile to the idea of women holding power, being from a popular political family provided the means for some women to break the mould. Indeed, until the late 1970s, widows and daughters dominated the small population of female politicians in Ireland (Galligan, Knight & Nic Giolla Choille 35).

In line with broader shifts in society, and influenced by the second wave of feminist activity, political parties (moderately) sought to modernise their public image by the early 1980s (McGing, "Women's Roles" 196-204). These nascent modernisation efforts facilitated more opportunities for 'new' women candidates, and the period witnessed an increase in the number of women contesting elections. Though progress was made, Irish politics remains a highly male-dominated environment. Women's political representation in Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Irish Parliament, has never risen above 16.5 per cent. In the 2011 general election, a record high of 25 (15.2 per cent) women were elected to Dáil Éireann.²

Irish women have also been underrepresented in executive office in Ireland. No woman has ever served as Taoiseach while less than 6 per cent of all cabinet ministers have been women. Those women who have been appointed cabinet ministers have tended to be clustered in portfolios that follow along gendered patterns (Connolly 361). However, in July 2014 a third woman was appointed to the role of Tánaiste (deputy prime minister), and a record four women now serve in the cabinet, the highest number of women ever appointed to a single cabinet. Between 1990 and 2011, two women served as Uachtarán na hÉireann (President of Ireland), and Ireland was the first country in the world to have two consecutively elected female heads of state (Galligan, "Women in Politics" 263).

Despite the advances of recent years politics in Ireland still remains male-dominated. Research suggests that a number of factors, broadly categorised as institutional, socio-economic, and cultural explain the political underrepresentation of women in Ireland. While each of these factors is important, in isolation they tend to ignore the reality that the emergence of female candidates and women's representation in Ireland, as elsewhere, is a complex and multivariate process. At each stage of the candidate emergence and recruitment processes, a woman's prospective candidacy can be derailed. The process by which women emerge as successful candidates requires

2 Following by-elections that took place between March 2011 and May 2014, the number of women deputies increased to 27 (16.3 per cent).

them to overcome significant obstacles and deterrents which have historically suppressed their opportunity to serve as elected Teachta Dála (TDs) in the Irish Parliament. The gendered pathway to elected office in Ireland best explains why women continue to be underrepresented in elected offices.

If women are to emerge as elected representatives and challenge the traditional roles assigned to them, they must first have an interest in politics. As we demonstrate, developing political interest is a significant first step to women's representation. The second step is for women who are interested in politics to develop the ambition to seek national office. Women have tended to be less ambitious and less willing to put themselves forward due to the scrutiny associated with political campaigns and because of the "double demand" of care and work placed on them. Third, if women are interested and ambitious, they also need to develop the experience and name recognition associated with successful candidacies. Developing name recognition with the wider electorate has been especially difficult for women because they have historically been severely underrepresented in Irish local government. Women have also been less likely to work and participate in sectors which facilitate the development of a local bailiwick, such as local business or sporting networks. The development of a local profile sufficient to secure a position as a councillor is especially important for women (Buckley & McGing 230). A fourth potential roadblock for women is the candidate selection process. Scholars have identified the tendency for men to be disproportionately selected as candidates even though women hold relatively modest percentages of party membership, ranging between 30 and 40 per cent (Buckley 347-351). Here we observe a gendered 'iron law' – the further one moves up the party ladder from party member to elected politician, the fewer women there are (Lovenduski 7).

As we have seen, women have had to overcome numerous challenges to emerge as successful candidates in Irish national politics. The newly enacted gender quota legislation offers the potential to redress some of the problems associated with the historic underrepresentation of women. Approved in July 2012, the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act creates a legalised candidate gender quota for Irish general elections which will oblige political parties to run at least 30 per cent women candidates in the next general election due to take place in 2016. The quota legislation also requires a minimum of 30 per cent male representation in candidate selection. The threshold will rise to 40 per cent seven years thereafter. If political parties fail to meet the gender quota, they will lose half of the State funding they receive annually under the Electoral Act of 1997. The law applies to national elections only and does not extend to local or European elections.

The achievement of gender quotas in Ireland may be a sign in and of itself of how Irish society and politics is changing from an old pattern that marginalized women's role in public life to one in which women play a prominent and public role. The gender quotas will affect the entire process of how women emerge as candidates and ultimately run for and win elections. While gender quotas may be designed to alleviate

the historic underrepresentation of women, their effect is dependent on their impact on all of the conditions associated with achieving election (Dahlerup & Freidenvall 421). We devise the following model to outline the process of necessary conditions for election:

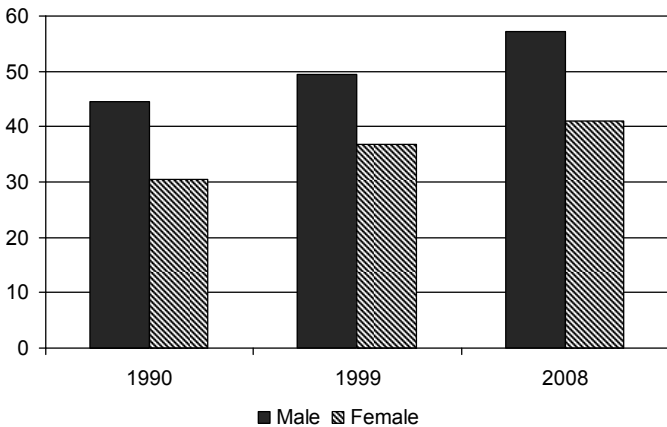
Interest → Confidence & Ambition → Local Experience → Candidate Selection → Election

In the sections that follow, we analyse each stage in the process of the development and election of candidates and assess how the recent gender quota legislation might increase the opportunity for women to emerge as viable candidates in future elections.

Interest, Ambition, and Confidence among Irish Women

Researchers have historically found that, in a variety of national contexts, women are less politically interested than men (Inglehart 299; Verba, Burns & Schlozman 1051). Evidence from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey over the last three decades highlights this reality. Though Irish women have become more interested in politics in the last twenty years, so too have Irish men. As a result, Irish women continue to lag behind men with regard to expressing an interest in politics (see fig. 1). Although the gap between men’s and women’s interest actually widened in the most recent survey, the survey results show that women are increasingly interested in politics and, importantly, that gender-based differences are not so great as to hinder the ability of parties to find potential female candidates to run for office.

Figure 1: Percentage of Irish Respondents "Somewhat" or "Very Interested" in Politics, by Sex



Source: Authors' Analysis of World Values Survey (1990, 1999) and European Values Survey (2008).

The recent adoption of gender quotas in Ireland may increase women's interest in electoral politics and their role in the political system. Evidence from other nation states indicates that the introduction of a quota can have a significant impact on women's political attitudes and behaviour. Previous research has found that heightened women's representation is associated with more positive political attitudes among women (Karp & Banducci 112) and that female candidates and representatives boosts women's political interest, knowledge, and efficacy (Burns, Schlozman & Verba 355). These findings suggest that by increasing the number of women candidates, the new gender quota could spur greater levels of political interest among Irish women.

Presently, there are numerous national and local districts in Ireland with all-male slates of representatives. 43 per cent of Irish girls and women have no female TD in their constituency in 2015. These patterns may depress the electoral ambitions of Irish women by sending the message that politics is "not for them." Thus, the long-term impact of gender quotas could be significant if the presence of female candidates and officeholders has a role model effect on other women that leads to higher levels of political interest and involvement (Campbell & Wolbrecht 233). Because women are often said to lack the confidence needed to run for office (Shvedova 45), the presence of women in political roles is important to ensure that women – particularly young women – can envision themselves running for office (Karp & Banducci 106). In the Irish context, anecdotal evidence suggests that the election of Mary Robinson as Ireland's first woman president in 1990 had a role model effect for women. Her election symbolized changes that were taking place in Irish society regarding women's roles (Galligan, "Activist Presidents" 130). After Robinson's presidential election victory in 1990, women's candidacy in general elections increased from 55 in 1989 to 89 in 1992, a 62 per cent rise. However, despite the changes that came in the early 1990s, the number of women contesting general elections has remained relatively static over the past twenty years. Therefore one should not overplay the importance of Robinson's victory in the 1990 presidential election. In Ireland the office of president is a largely ceremonial role with few discretionary powers. As in other countries with a similar system, women have fared better in the weaker political position (Jalalzai 2).

The emergence of successful candidates is a multi-stage process that requires both the development of political ambition and the decision to act on that ambition to seek election. Previous research in the US context indicates that women, even when equally qualified, are less likely than men to see themselves as qualified for politics and less optimistic about their prospects of victory (Fox & Lawless 264). In Ireland, the lack of political ambition is a key factor inhibiting women's representation. Gender-based differences in political ambition are the result of different patterns of political socialization and the creation of different expectations with respect to political roles informed by gender. Patterns of political party activism may be a contributor here – if women are less 'visible' in internal party structures, they will have less capital available to build an initial *selection* campaign, never mind an election campaign. Caul-Kittilson's (126) cross-national study demonstrates that the more women have

achieved leadership positions in a party the more likely that women candidates will be elected from that party. According to Galligan (“Women in Politics” 271) in Ireland this “is achieved mainly through socialising prospective candidates into the norms and rules of political decision-making, providing future candidates with a profile within the party.”

Figure 2 shows that across all party structures in Ireland in 2013 women account for a much higher percentage of those in supportive roles (i.e. secretaries and treasurers) than in leadership positions (i.e. chairs and vice-chairs). This provides continuing evidence of Galligan’s (“Women in Politics” 272) assertion that in Irish party politics there is a persistent bias in favour of traditional gender roles in internal party structures that discourages the ambitions of aspiring women candidates and perpetuates the cycle of women’s exclusion from electoral politics. Even more worryingly, gender biases are also evident in the youth factions of Ireland’s main parties (McGing, “Women’s Roles” 210-211). As young members constitute potential candidates of the future, male dominance at this level could act to hinder the political progression of more young women in parties.

Figure 2: Women Constituency Officeholders in Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fáil in 2013

	Fine Gael (%)	Labour (%)	Fianna Fáil (%)
Chair	9.3	13.3	7.0
Vice-Chair	18.6	32.0	6.0
Secretary	18.6	35.0	46.0
Treasurer	32.5	23.0	25.0

Source: Buckley 346. Sinn Fein data was unavailable.

Quotas have the potential to encourage a societal shift that encourages political engagement and ambition among women while redefining and reimagining the role that women play in the party. Geissel & Hust (393) found that quotas allocated for women candidates helped foster the ambition necessary for women to pursue election. We expect and anticipate that Ireland’s recent gender quota legislation will help reduce this historic obstacle to achieving greater female representation in Ireland by reconfiguring expectations and roles historically biased in men’s favour.

The Importance of Local Experience

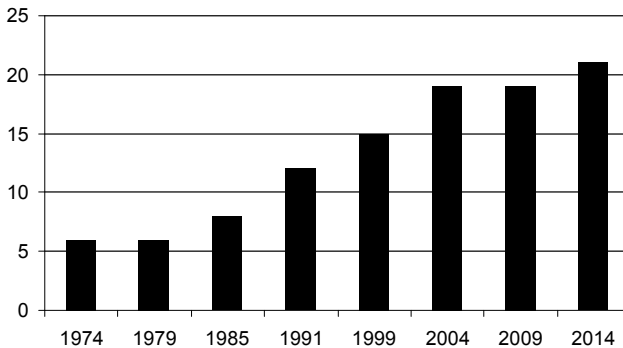
Increasing women’s representation at the national level may depend on whether women candidates can first win election to local office. Local offices provide women with the opportunity to gain the experience, name recognition, and credibility needed to become effective candidates for national office (Fox & Lawless 265; Palmer & Simon 128). In addition to providing candidates with key skills and experiences that

prepare them for electoral success at a higher level, local office-holding is a crucial factor in party recruitment efforts and voter evaluations of candidates. Pederson, Kjaer & Eliassen (160-161), for example, found that a large number of parliamentarians across Western Europe have some form of geographical connection to their elected constituencies.

Local connections are especially important to electoral success in Ireland. An analysis of the 2007 and 2011 elections showed that the vast majority of the men and women elected to the Dáil had prior experience in local politics. In both 2007 and 2011, more than three-quarters of the male candidates elected to the Dáil had previously held a local office (76 per cent and 81 per cent, respectively). Though the figures for men are high, the percentage of elected women with prior local experience was even higher. In 2007, 86 per cent of the women elected to the Dáil had prior local experience, and in 2011 the figure was 88 per cent. Thus, in recent general elections, nearly nine out of ten women elected as TDs had prior experience in local government (Buckley, Mariani, McGing & White).

Given that the pipeline of future TDs tends to be populated by male councillors, it is worrying that there has been little progress in women’s local representation over time (see Figure 3). Historically, women won 6 per cent of local government seats in 1974 and 1979 (Manning 158, 160) and 8 per cent of seats in the 1985 local election. In 1991, a year after Mary Robinson was elected as Ireland’s first woman President, women won 12 per cent of seats in local elections, and in 1999 15 per cent of the seats in the local elections were won by women. The percentage of local seats held by women rose to 19 per cent in 2004 but fell to 17 per cent in the 2009 local elections.

Figure 3: Percentage Women Elected to City and County Councils, 1974-2014



Sources: 1974 and 1979 figures from Manning 158 and 160; 1985-2004 figures courtesy of Adrian Kavanagh; 2009 and 2014 figures based on data compiled by the authors. These figures refer to seats won on county and city councils. Following the 2007 general election, councillors who won election to the Dáil had to relinquish their local seat. Some vacated seats were filled by female relatives of resigning councillors, increasing the percentage of women councillors. In 2014, town councils were eliminated.

As previously noted the new gender quota legislation does not apply at the local level. However, in the most recent local elections in May 2014 parties imposed informal gender targets ranging from 25 to 33 per cent for their candidate selections. Women's candidacies increased to just fewer than 22 per cent as a result of these targeting efforts. Sinn Féin reached their self-imposed gender target of 30 percent while Labour came close at 29 per cent women candidates. However Fine Gael and especially Fianna Fáil fell below their targets of 25 and 33 per cent respectively. Because of their failure to recruit a significant number of female candidates in the local elections, the two largest parties are likely to find it difficult to recruit an adequate number of female candidates who possess the experience and profile to run successfully in the next general election.

The passage of significant local reforms could also be an important factor that affects the ability of women to gain critically important experience in local offices. In 2014, previously separate city and county councils were consolidated in an effort to reduce costs by trimming the overall number of councillors (see fig. 4). The number of County, City, Town and Borough Councils was reduced by 73 per cent (from 114 to 31). This led to a cut in the number of local councillors by 42 per cent (from 1,627 to 949). Obviously, a decrease in the number of seats means fewer opportunities for both men and women to gain local government experience. In terms of advancement to the national legislature, the reforms are likely to hurt women more than men because local government experience has been found to be a more critical factor in the election of women to the Dáil (Buckley, Mariani, McGing & White).

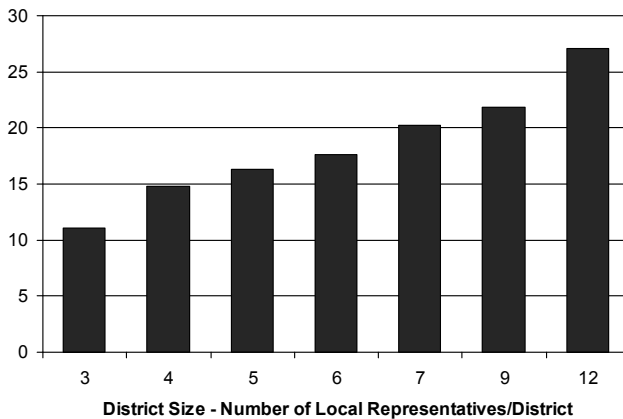
Figure 4: Number and Type of Local Authorities and Seats, Before and After Local Government Reforms

	2009 Local Authorities			2014 Local Elections		
	Number	Electoral Areas	Seats	Number	Electoral Areas	Seats
County Councils	29	145	753	26	108	765
City Councils	5	26	130	3	18	112
Borough Councils	5	8	60	---	---	---
Town Councils	75	79	684	---	---	---
City & County Councils	--	--	--	2	11	72
Total	114	258	1627	31	137	949
Electoral Area Magnitude (mean)	6.31			7.19		

Sources: 2009 Data from Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government; 2014 data from Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee.

However, there are some aspects of the reforms to local elections that have the potential to facilitate the election of more women. The number of seats available in local electoral areas has increased on average from 6.31 under the old system to 7.19 in the new local authorities. The increase in district magnitude is important because previous research has established that women do better electorally when they run in districts with a larger number of seats (White 75-77). Data from the 2009 local elections in Ireland provides added support for this argument. As Figure 5 illustrates, the more seats in an electoral area the higher the percentage of women elected to local office in 2009. Moreover, larger constituencies may bring another, more subtle, advantage to women candidates as they give better electoral prospects to smaller (predominately left-orientated) parties who are more likely to run females in the first place.

Figure 5: Percentage Women Elected, by District Size, 2009 Local Elections



Source: Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

The Candidate Selection Process

Political parties exercise the fundamental role of selecting and presenting candidates for election. In some political systems the importance of candidate selection is recognised to the extent that rules have been incorporated into election law, as in the United States for example. In most systems, however, the processes of candidate selection are private and internal to the parties and have historically been seen to disadvantage women (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer 556-557). In Ireland, the selection of candidates is decentralised to local party units where candidates are chosen at selection conventions consisting of local party members. However, party head offices reserve the right to add candidates to the ticket in any constituency and may also apply conditions in local party selection conventions, interventions which are not always welcomed by the local party selectorate.

Because parties nominate candidates, they play a critical role in determining the level of women's political representation (Caul 80). The identification and development of candidates in Ireland – the political parties' primary function – has favoured men. Changes to the party selection process are necessary in order to allow the emergence of greater numbers of female candidates (McGing, "The Single Transferable Vote" 337). The candidate selection process is regarded as most crucial to improving gender representation. The norm in liberal democracies is for political parties to act as 'gatekeepers' in that they recruit the majority of election candidates (apart from those who decided to run as independents, though these are also predominately male), ensuring that party masculinity is mapped onto representation patterns in parliament. The key to increasing women's likelihood of being selected for meaningful candidacies has been found to be the centralization of the candidate selection process (Hinojosa 3). Efforts at achieving higher rates of women's representation through quotas could be frustrated by the ability of local party organizations to ignore or defy the purpose of the quota (Matland 276). Furthermore, Ireland suffers from a historic pattern also identified by Kenny (35) in Scotland where the localism involved in candidate selection favours the selection of male candidates (Buckley, Mariani & White). Political localism proves a highly gendered process where party men, because of their standing in the community and additional resources relative to women, are seen as the "natural" local candidate while new women can be regarded as "outsiders." Nonetheless, some party cultures and ideologies are much more receptive than others to the emergence of women candidates (McGing, "Women's Roles" 196-205). In Ireland, despite the fact they have historically run fewer multiple candidate tickets and have lower electoral prospects than Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the political left of Labour, Sinn Féin, and the Green Party have been much more likely to promote their women members to the electoral level. Their centre-leftist political ideologies have aided this, as has the fact that these parties have historically had fewer incumbents and this gives them the space to run more female candidates.

The recent gender quota legislation in Ireland provides huge financial incentives for the major political parties to ensure that women emerge as candidates in the local constituencies. It remains to be seen whether the parties will devote the time and resources needed to develop, recruit, and support large numbers of highly qualified female candidates in national elections. In addition, party leaders may also find that the low level of female officeholders at the local level may make it difficult to recruit experienced female candidates. In that event, parties may end up selecting women to be so-called 'sacrificial lambs' on the ballot paper with little chance of winning (Stambough & O'Regan 350).

Looking Towards the Future: The Impact of Gender Quotas

The recently approved gender quota legislation in Ireland is designed to increase the number of female candidates seeking election to the Dáil. The legislation may end up

having a broad impact at every stage of the candidate development process. The increased number of women candidates in the next Dáil election – and the media coverage that accompanies it – may inspire more women to become interested in politics and to consider politics as a profession. Though Irish women as a group continue to be less interested in politics than Irish men, political interest among women has been increasing and the gap between men and women is not very large. A surge in female candidacies will provide the public with new models of female leadership and political activism that could very well result in a sizable and lasting shift in public attitudes about the role that women play in Irish politics.

The gender quota legislation clearly encouraged most political parties to seek and advance female candidates in the 2014 local elections. Sinn Féin and the Labour Party (as well as other left-leaning parties and groupings such as the Green Party, the Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit) proved most effective in increasing their number of local female candidates. Sinn Féin, which achieved a record level of support in those elections, are very well placed to reach the gender quota as they select candidates for the next general election. The Labour Party has voluntarily used gender-based targets for local election selections since 1985 (the first Irish party to do so), though local resistance, especially in rural Ireland, has meant the party does not always meet its aims. Labour did poorly in the most recent local elections but fielded a large number of female local candidates; they appear ready to meet the gender quota for the next general election. Fine Gael, while increasing its number of women candidates at the 2014 local elections, fell significantly short of having a 30 per cent threshold of female candidates. Fine Gael also has a very high number of male incumbent TDs who will want to seek re-election in the 2016 general election. Therefore the party may find it difficult to reach the gender quota requirement. Fianna Fáil, while doing well in the last local elections and re-emerging as the largest political party at the local level did not field a higher percentage of female candidates who might have developed the experience and local profile to be quality candidates for the next general election. As a result Fianna Fáil will find it difficult to meet the gender quota as they select candidates for the next general election. However, the party leadership is determined to do so and in January 2015 published an internal party document – the Markievicz Commission Report – outlining its strategy to achieve the gender quota.

In terms of candidate selection for the next general election, all political parties are likely to devote a greater amount of time and resources to recruit female candidates for the Dáil so that they will qualify for their full share of government funding under the quota legislation. In addition to gender quotas, scholars have identified equality strategies such as youth citizenship education, awareness campaigns, recruitment initiatives, training programs, and fund-raising networks (Krook & Norris) as mechanisms which political parties engage in to encourage and support female candidacy. There is evidence that party organisations are already engaged in these activities. All

political parties provide training sessions for female candidates and some host networking events to identify and mobilize potential female candidates.

Taken together, increased political interest on the part of women and heightened demand for female candidates on the part of party leaders and local selectors is likely to result in a pipeline effect in which an increasing number of qualified female candidates are available to move from local to national level offices. Thus, quotas may serve as a remedy for the history of women's lack of representation in Ireland and fulfil the goals of equality, representation, and the achievement of rights for all citizens that is at the heart of liberal democracy (Bacchi; Childs & Lovenduski 493-496; Krook & Schwindt-Bayer 557-558). As a result of quotas and their anticipated effects, the Ireland of the twenty-first century will likely see significantly higher levels of female representation than has been experienced in the past. A century after the 1916 Proclamation spoke of equality between women and men, Ireland may finally see a more equal gender distribution in politics – a marker of a healthy and inclusive democracy.

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