

Gender Quotas and Female Political Representation in the Republic of Ireland

Roisin Putti

In 2012, the Irish Government introduced gender quotas into the lower house of parliament – the Dáil – in order to address the acute problem of female political underrepresentation. This paper examines the effectiveness of this measure. It finds that gender quotas in Ireland have been particularly successful in eroding the masculinised political culture in Irish politics. In terms of an increased focus on women's issues, it is at present too soon to ascertain the effects of the new gender balance in the Dáil. However, taking erosion of masculine cultural legacies as an end in itself, as well as a means to other ends, it is submitted that gender quotas are having a positive impact on Irish politics and should be complemented by other mechanisms in order to achieve the goal of gender equal political representation.

Introduction

Despite widespread social change since the 1970s, Ireland's political arena has been astoundingly male-dominated. Only 92 women have served as Teachtaí Dála (TDs) in the lower House of Parliament, Dáil Éireann, between the first Dáil in 1918 and 2011 – a number so low, it would not even fill a single Dáil sitting (Buckley 2013a). Faced with such dismal statistics, the Irish government recently adopted gender quotas for female political participation in the Lower House. This paper analyses the effectiveness of these quotas. It argues that gender quotas in Ireland have been particularly successful due to the existence of a masculinised political culture in Irish politics. This culture stems from a combination of patriarchal structures and emphasis on local politics due to the specificities

of the Irish electoral system. However, while it is evident that gender quotas have led to an increase in female legislators, the extent to which the new composition of the Dáil has resulted in an increased focus on women's issues is as yet unclear. Nevertheless, based on the results of the 2016 election, this paper views gender quotas as a successful policy, since elimination of the masculinised nature of Irish politics can be viewed as an 'end' in itself, as well as a means to other ends.

This paper begins by examining existing feminist literature on descriptive representation and gender quotas. It then traces the introduction of gender quotas in Ireland and looks at data from the 2016 General election in order to analyse the male-female demographics of the 33rd Dáil. It offers an opinion on the extent to which gender quotas can be said to be responsible for changes in composition. It will then consider the success of the gender quotas in challenging masculinised legacies and implementing female-oriented policies. It concludes by affirming the success of gender quotas, but noting areas where gender quotas should be complemented by other policy tools aimed at creating a more gender equal political assembly.

Distributive Representation and Gender Quotas

Calls for gender quotas in political representation reflect, among other things, the belief that women's issues are better represented by women. This belief is held by supporters of descriptive representation, analysis of which must necessarily start with the work of Hanna Pitkin (cited in Celis *et al* 2008, p. 100). Pitkin outlined four categories of representation – formal, descriptive, symbolic and substantive – but dismissed the first three categories as limited in various ways. Crucially, from the point of view of this paper, she found that descriptive representation -- defined as representation by those 'sharing similar characteristics with the represented' (Kurebwa 2015) focused too much on who the representative was, rather than what the representative did. This view has been revisited by a number of feminist political theorists calling for descriptive representation in relation to gender. Theorists such as Mansbridge (1999, p. 652) argue that, where communication is impaired by distrust, interests are not articulated, and the group suffers from historical persecution and low legitimacy, descriptive representation has more benefits than costs. Similarly, Dovi (2002, p. 729) argues that should the representative in question possess 'strong mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups of historically disadvantaged groups', descriptive representation is desirable.

However, there is divergence of opinion among feminist theorists regarding how exactly a political system should be equipped with features that enhance descriptive representation. While support for gender quotas implies support for descriptive representation at least to some extent, the converse is not necessarily true. In his examination of women's political representation in European countries, Stockemer (2007) noted the prevalence and success of gender quotas. However, he qualified this finding by arguing that quotas as a tool for more gender equal political representation should be confined to the short term. Mansbridge (1999, p. 652) argues that permanent gender quotas should be avoided since they essentialise women. Interestingly, this ambivalence regarding gender quotas is not confined to the academic realm. Keenan and McElroy's (2017, p. 382) review of public opinion on gender quotas show that in many countries where gender quotas have been adopted, such as the UK, they have not been desired by the electorate. Nevertheless, supporters of gender quotas maintain that there are a number of benefits to the diversified political representation that quotas produce – for example, the prevention of wasted talent and an increased focus on issues which might otherwise be overlooked (Stockemer 2007, p.477).

Gender Quotas and the Irish Political System

Legally binding gender quotas were introduced into the Irish political system in the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act in July 2012 (Buckley, 2013a). This was not the first attempt to make the political process more women-friendly. Since the 1990s parties had pursued internal campaigns to encourage women to run for political office (Buckley 2013b, p. 342). However, most policies adopted for these purposes were little more than rhetorical strategies with minimal substantive effect.

The political climate in 2012 was receptive to gender quotas for a number of reasons. Firstly, the aftermath of the economic downturn of 2008 prompted calls for political reform. Fine Gael was elected in 2011 on a mandate of political modernisation, with legally binding gender quotas a foundation of its election campaign. Buckley (2013b, p. 354) argues that, facing substantial economic hurdles, implementation of gender quotas was one of the easiest election promises for the government to keep. Interestingly, parliamentary debate on the issue was relatively one-sided in favour of adoption of quotas. Given that such unanimous support for quotas did not exist across broader society, this fact is surprising. However, those who did disagree with the gender quotas did so in strong terms, calling it 'undemocratic', 'unconstitutional' and 'discriminatory' (Buckley 2013b, p. 350).

Female political activists were vital in the journey towards political quotas. Female legislators played an active role, with Senator Ivana Bacik chairing committee tasked with examining women's political participation (Buckley 2013b, p. 349). Similarly, women's groups played an instrumental role in civil society. The 5050 Group campaigned for the introduction of gender quotas through public meetings, social media campaigns and political lobbying (Buckley, 2013a). However, men were also necessary in introducing the measures. Gregory Schmidt argues that gender quotas cannot succeed unless they have a high-profile male advocate (cited in Buckley 2013a). If this is true, Phil Hogan's support for the cause was an important factor in the introduction of gender quotas.

The 2016 election saw a dramatic change in the composition of the Dáil. All parties succeeded in reaching the 30% quota at the selection procedure, with some of the left-aligned parties exceeding it (Buckley, 2016). This implementation of the quotas, which, it is submitted, was due to the tough non-compliance sanctions, resulted in a 90% increase in women on the ballot. This, in turn, produced a 40% increase in the number of elected female parliamentarians. Following the 2016 elections, the percentage of female TDs has increased from 15.7% to 22.2% (Gallagher, 2016). While this is below the one-third necessary to achieve a critical mass, it accords with European levels of female political representation (Stockemer 2007, p. 476).

Explaining Changes in the Composition of the 33rd Dáil

For the purposes of reaching a sound conclusion on the efficacy of quotas, it is necessary to consider other factors which may explain the increased election of women in Irish politics. McGing (2013, p. 322) argues that a major barrier to female representation in Ireland is voters' preference for the incumbent – this preference may have been limited in 2016 given economic hardship but would perhaps better explain an upsurge in female TDs in 2011 rather than 2016. Similarly, a generalised claim of social change could be a contributing factor, but since women have been steadily entering the workforce since the 1970s, this could hardly bring about such a radical change in such a short space of time. Furthermore, McElroy and Marsh (2011, p. 533) find that Irish voters are not biased towards male or female candidates, so the change must have come at the level of candidate selection rather than voter attitudes.

Thus, it is likely that a great deal of the change in composition of the 33rd Dáil can be attributed to the introduction of gender quotas. Since feminist political theorists have been ambivalent about the efficacy of

gender quotas, interesting questions can be posed relating to why gender quotas have brought about such wide-reaching changes in female political representation in Ireland. It is submitted that the success of gender quotas in Ireland relates is due to their ability to fix the problem at its source. Many political theorists have argued that internal party selection procedures are the main obstacle faced by women seeking election. Irish Political parties, operating in a highly patriarchal structure, view men as the 'less risky' candidates, and are thus more likely to nominate them. A second systemic bias against women is the strongly localised dimension of Irish politics, which favours 'people' over 'parties' (Buckley 2016). In a political system where personality determines electability more than policy preferences, networking is crucial. Bjarnegård (2013, p. 28) argues that men are better equipped to network than women. Using empirical evidence, she notes that while the political success of women necessitates networking with men, male political candidates do not need to network with women in order to enjoy success. Thus, what she terms 'homosocial capital', is an explanatory factor in male overrepresentation in politics all over the world.

Gender quotas have been able to overcome these systemic biases by 'forcing the hands' of political parties traditionally in favour of appointing 'anointed local sons' (McGing 2013, p. 336). They have gone a long way towards eliminating masculine political culture in Irish politics, which, it is submitted, is the main factor explaining poor female representation in Ireland.

Yet gender quotas have not completely destroyed this discriminatory political culture. Buckley (2016) reports that party members in many constituencies claimed that female candidates were only selected for purpose of fulfilling the quota, and were under-qualified – however, there was no evidence that the women being referred to were any less politically experienced than their male counterparts. Similarly, women running on a dual ticket with a man claimed that most resources tended to be invested in the male candidate. That is, party officials were still less likely to 'gamble' valuable resources on getting women elected. Nevertheless, the process of erosion of this masculine cultural legacy has undoubtedly begun.

Gender Quotas and Women-friendly Policies

Almost two years after the 2016 general election, this paper embarks on an investigation of whether or not the recent compositional change of the Dáil has resulted in a reorientation of policymakers towards women's issues. The upcoming referendum on repealing the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution appears to answer this question in the affirmative. Since

the amendment pertains to the controversial topic of abortion, promises of a referendum evidence a focus on women's issues. But, it is unclear to what extent this focus was brought about by the increase in female TDs. Ivana Bacik (2013) traces the development of the law on abortion in Ireland and argues that the Irish courts and Legal System have been primarily responsible for modernisation in the area of abortion, due to lack of political will to take action. Thus, the upcoming referendum for the 8th Amendment has its roots in political and legal developments which took place far before the 2016 General Election. Furthermore, while women have played an invaluable lobbying role, this occurred primarily outside of the legislative chambers, in the form of Women's Lobby groups.

Although the surge in female TDs may not explain decision to put a referendum to the people, these women are playing an important role in carrying out much of the work involved in allowing this referendum to go forward. The Oireachtas Committee on the Eighth Amendment, although chaired by a man, contains 9 women on a panel of 15 (Oireachtas 2017a). This ensures that women's voices will be heard in the exact drafting of the referendum and discussions regarding what might replace the repealed article. However, the impact of the gender composition of the panel cannot be fully seen until the findings of the Committee are published in December 2017.

Besides the issue of abortion, the Irish Legislature has seen the proposal of a number of bills focusing on women's issues, and broader issues of gender equality. Some examples include the Domestic Violence Bill, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Gender Pay Gap Information) Bill and the Gender Recognition (Amendment) Bill (Oireachtas, 2017b). However, all three of these bills were proposed by the upper house of the Oireachtas – where no gender quotas are used. It may be that the newly elected women in the lower house will be instrumental in ensuring that these Seanad-initiated bills pass through the Dáil, but, again, this remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that introduction of gender quotas in Irish politics has resulted in a dramatic increase in the proportion of female TDs. While other factors are inevitably at play, it argues that gender quotas were the primary reason for this compositional change. The success of gender quotas points to the fact that selection procedure, and not voter preference was the more important factor explaining low levels of female political representation in Ireland prior to 2016. Thus, the Irish political system

has correctly identified the root of the problem and made efforts to fix the problem of underrepresentation at the source.

It is perhaps too soon to say whether the increased female presence in the Dáil will have any substantive effect on the enactment and implementation of women-friendly policies. Analysis of bills proposed since 2016 has not provided any conclusive evidence for or against this claim. The coming months, leading up to the referendum on the 8th Amendment will provide an interesting study in this regard.

Notwithstanding the success of gender quotas, women in politics continue to face barriers. Eileen Connolly's (2013) analysis of the portfolios of female cabinet ministers in Ireland up to 2013 showed low upwards mobility of female TDs. The cabinet composition of the 33rd Dáil paints a similar picture in terms of lack of female presence, and indeed occupation by women of traditionally 'female' portfolios. Connolly (2013, p. 377) suggests that an overall increase in female Dáil members could help increase the number of women in high-profile cabinet positions, but given the political cultural of the Dáil, this process is by no means automatic. It is argued that gender quotas alone will not bring about complete political gender equality. Soft policies aimed at increasing consciousness of the gendered nature of cabinet member appointment would complement gender quotas nicely.

Despite categorisation of gender quotas as a short-term policy tool by many political theorists, this paper sees no reason in phasing out a mechanism which has had such immediate success any time in the near future. Rather, the quota threshold should increase and be used in conjunction with other policy tools in order to bring about more gender equal political representation in Ireland.

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