

Focus on: Ireland

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE FROM A GENDER LENS

A series of write up from experts in the field reflecting on the role of women in last elections.

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About the Author

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE MARY CUMMINS

Mary Cummins is a seasoned professional with over 20 years of international experience in elections, political parties, democratic governance, and civil society. She has held senior leadership roles, including over a decade with the UN and 15 years with major international NGOs. Mary has also advised a parliamentary party in Ireland and the European Parliament on media and communications. She has led key electoral and legislative initiatives in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and beyond, ensuring alignment with international standards and promoting effective, inclusive governance.



Only a Modest Boost for Women in the Incoming Irish Parliament

Ireland lags far behind most European countries when it comes to women representation in the national parliament despite the introduction of a 40% candidate gender quota for the Irish general election held on 29 November 2024. The increase in the percentage of women parliamentarians in the incoming Dáil (parliament) is just 2%, raising the total to 25% or 44 women out of 174 representatives - the most women ever elected to the Irish parliament (*womenforelection.ie*).

In the past 32 years, there has been an increase in both the number of women selected as candidates (from 18.5% in 1992 to 36% in 2024) and elected parliamentarians from 12% in 1992 to 25% in 2024 (*womenforelection.ie*). Although these are positive outcomes, progress towards a truly representative gender balance in the parliament remains slow. Yet, this election cycle did see some notable positive developments in gender representation. There was a record number of women candidates, with 246 women contesting among 687 candidates—a 52% increase compared to the 2020 general elections.

Three of four women successfully led their parties in the election, and many women across the country either topped or closely approached the top of the polls in their respective constituencies. Notably, one woman candidate made history by becoming the first in the country to be elected while also achieving the highest vote count in her constituency.

While one party leader welcomed a daughter on election day, many of the women contesting in polls did not have familial connections to the parliament. Instead, they had primarily advanced through the party ranks as local councillors. Contributing to their parties in various roles. Others were actively engaged in their communities, thereby establishing a strong local presence in their constituencies. One constituency elected three women parliamentarians out of a total of five representatives.

Recent amendments to the electoral law mandate a 40% gender quota for candidates in general elections, parties lose 50% of their State funding for non-compliance. It remains crucial, however, for the major political parties to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the effective implementation of the law rather than merely paying lip service to the requirement. This includes parties ensuring that women candidates are nominated in a timely manner, rather than being added to party tickets at the last minute, which limits their preparation time for launching an effective campaign. None of the main political parties have achieved the goal of electing 40% women to their representation in Parliament.

Parties need to provide women candidates with adequate support to ensure they have a fair opportunity to secure a seat (*womenforelections.ie*). Political parties do understand this, and they are increasingly offering support to women candidates to encourage greater gender representation in politics. These include training programmes for women candidates, guidance, advice, financial and logistical support and networking opportunities. However, the commitment of party leadership in certain parties remains somewhat ambiguous towards ensuring that women candidates are given every

opportunity to develop their base – including measures such as increased financial support for their campaigns and ensuring more women are nominated and fully supported to contest local government elections (the 40% gender quota does not apply to any other election in the Republic) so they gain experience and can grow their profile and build up a support base at constituency level.

A woman candidate representing one of the major political parties shared her experience of encountering both internal and external opposition following her inclusion on the party's ticket for a specific constituency. She expressed that the criticisms were challenging to confront. Nonetheless, she resolved to persevere in her candidacy, motivated by her commitment to paving the way for future generations.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an organization dedicated to the study of extremism, hate, and disinformation, in collaboration with the Hope and Courage Collective, a civil society organization committed to combating hate and extremism, conducted a joint investigation into violent activities observed in the five-week period leading up to the general election (*thejournal.ie*). This investigation documented a total of 55 incidents. Of these, six (11%) occurred in person, 30 (55%) took place online, and 19 (35%) involved a combination of both offline and online elements, including the dissemination of videos depicting candidates facing harassment or verbal abuse during their canvassing efforts. The investigation highlighted the use of explicit racist, misogynistic, and anti-Muslim language in instances of harassment, as well as targeted acts of hate directed towards women and candidates of migrant backgrounds. It appears that social media and other online platforms are falling short in enforcing community guidelines, thereby allowing extremists to operate with impunity, target candidates, and pose a threat to democratic processes.

Women in Ireland continue to face significant challenges in achieving gender equality in politics. There is a noticeable lack of female representation in senior Cabinet positions, with no woman having ever served as finance minister, foreign affairs minister, or Taoiseach (prime minister). Incumbency offers a considerable advantage in political roles, which often favors male counterparts who benefit from longer tenures and greater visibility. In contrast, many female parliamentarians are relatively new in their positions and do not enjoy the same level of job security as their male colleagues. Therefore, it is crucial for political parties reassess their strategies and ensure the retention of women who have demonstrated their effectiveness as successful candidates.

With three of the twelve parties in the incoming parliament led by women, and in a historic first, a woman has been elected as the Ceann Comhairle (Speaker), there are signs of change. But that would depend on the incoming parliament proactively addressing barriers to women's political representation and candidates and empowering women lawmakers in the new parliament.

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