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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Going alone and taking the independent route: new insights on female candidate emergence

Fiona Buckley – f.buckley@ucc.ie

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Using a novel approach - examining independent women and comparing them with their party counterparts - this article offers new insights on candidate emergence, recruitment and election of women, within and beyond political parties. To-date, studies of gender, candidate recruitment and institutions have concentrated on parties and party women. These studies highlight the gendered aspects of party candidate recruitment and conclude that parties are gate-keepers of women's candidacy. This article finds that beyond party boundaries, the emergence and election of independent women is circumscribed by individual, institutional and political culture dynamics which have consequences for independent women's candidacy. The independent route is no less gendered or more advantageous a pathway for women's candidacy.

Keywords independents, women, gender, institutions, candidate emergence, candidate recruitment

Key messages

- Within and beyond political parties, political institutions and political culture matter in the emergence and election of women candidates.
- Within and beyond political parties, women's candidate emergence is circumscribed by norms of the male status quo suggesting that the situation for women will remain unchanged unless these norms are interrupted. There is evidence to suggest that legislative gender quotas are causing a disruption.
- Community activism, local office experience, membership of a loose alliance of independents, being a former party member, time and money are important resources for the emergence of women independents.
- In comparison to female independent candidates, key attributes in the backgrounds of women selected by political parties include incumbency, previous elected office experience and familial links.

Introduction

Political parties are the primary agent of women's candidate emergence, selection and election. It is not surprising then that studies of women and candidate recruitment have concentrated on parties only, and the dominant analytical framework employed is that of the supply and demand model. This presupposes that the number of women contesting election is determined by an intersection of the number of women who put themselves forward for selection (*supply*) and the propensity of party members, mostly men, to select female candidates (*demand*) (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Adopting a feminist institutionalism approach, subsequent studies of women and candidate recruitment accentuate the role of gender and how it plays out at both individual and institutional levels to favour the emergence of the 'ideal candidate', usually a man (Chapman, 1993; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2014: 3). As observed by Bjarnegård and Kenny (2014: 3), candidate recruitment procedures are shaped

by 'gender norms', but these 'recruitment practices, in turn, sit within a wider context of systemic barriers – including electoral and party systems – that have a differential effect on men and women as institutional actors'.

There is general agreement among feminist political scientists that partisan candidate selection is a gendered process and political parties are gendered organisations. However, as the past two decades have shown, processes of party fragmentation and realignment, coupled with a decline in party politics participation, has seen a 'proliferation of "nonconventional" forms of political participation and engagement' (Ancetti and Wolkenstein, 2017: 7). This has led to the emergence of 'multiple newer channels of civic engagement, mobilisation and expression … to supplement the traditional modes' (Norris 2002, 3-4 cited in Accetti and Wolkenstein, 2017: 8). An outcome of these dynamics is that at election time, parties are less able to exert a monopoly over the supply of candidates for election (Copus et al, 2009; Clark, 2010) as individuals, civil society and quasi-parties embrace non-party or independent routes into political candidacy. In 2013, there were independents in the national parliaments of 36 leading industrial democracies with many others elected to sub-national parliaments, local councils and territorial assemblies across the world (Weeks, 2016: 582 and 584). Welbourne (2020 forthcoming) estimates that between 2015 and 2017, 25 countries featured independent female parliamentarians in their national assemblies. However, independent women's candidacy is an under-researched area, as studies of women, gender and political recruitment primarily focus upon party women, while the literature on independents has concentrated on identifying the key institutional and cultural factors that determine the emergence of non-party candidates, but has largely ignored the gendered nature of these dynamics. Consequently, very little is known about those women who contest election as non-party or independent candidates or the processes that facilitate this candidacy route. This article seeks to address this gap.

Firstly, drawing from two databases, one consisting of demographic, political and electoral details of all female candidates at the 2007, 2011 and 2016 general elections in Ireland, and the second identifying all women who ever contested a general election in Ireland as an independent candidate between 1922 and 2016, this baseline study offers a descriptive account of independent women candidates, examining their personal and political histories to identify patterns of recruitment among female non-partisans.

Secondly, party women who contested the 2007, 2011 and 2016 general elections in Ireland are studied alongside their non-party counterparts, and their political and personal biographies are contrasted. In so doing, information is presented of the 'types of women who become politically empowered' (O'Brien and Piscopo, 2018: 140) and expands knowledge about *who* are female politicians, *how* did they get there and *why* (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995:11 emphasis in original)?

Thirdly, studies of party women and political recruitment stress the role of gender and how it plays out at both individual and institutional levels to favour the emergence of the 'ideal candidate'. As noted, this is usually a man, but despite this gendered reality, certain women still emerge and get selected by political parties. Who are the women favoured by political parties? Examining the political and demographic biographies of party women candidates and contrasting these with their independent counterparts is a novel way of addressing this

question. If differential characteristics are observed across the two sets of women candidates, and if there is a particular feature that is shared among party women, this may shed light on the factors or characteristics that party selectors value when selecting female candidates.

Mindful that the broad literature on candidate recruitment distinguishes between different levels of analysis, this article pays attention to the norms and attributes of political institutions, political culture, individual level effects and practices that shape candidate recruitment processes (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Norris 1997; Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2015: 768).

The paper proceeds from here with a brief theoretical discussion of the factors that shape women's candidacy, and the gendered effects and outcomes of seemingly neutral institutional processes on women's candidate recruitment. The Irish case-study is then introduced, outlining Ireland's experience of independents and providing an overview of women in Irish politics. This is followed by the data section which sets out the research design and presents the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for the scholarship on gender, women and political recruitment and suggests future avenues for research.

Women's political candidacy

Studies of women, gender and candidate recruitment find that gender acts as both a social construct and a feature of institutions, particularly party organisations, shaping opportunities and attitudes about female candidacy (see Krook and Mackay, 2011; Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny, 2013; Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2014:3). It is clear that institutions, formal and informal, matter and are central to the dynamics of women's candidate recruitment and selection, whether this is analysed at the level of the individual, party, political system or political culture.

Individual level resources such as political experience, family in politics, local networks, availability of time and financial practicalities, as well as motivational factors such as an individual's confidence, interest, and political ambition, determine the supply of candidates into the electoral market place, with political parties being the primary agent of candidacy and election in politics worldwide. The gendered effects of supply and demand for party women are well documented (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), and while these will vary by country, time and party, studies generally conclude that differential access to key political resources, such as time, money, and networks, privilege male candidate emergence and stymies women's (Culhane, 2017). The interaction between demand and supply factors further compounds the problem of women's candidate emergence. The continuing male dominance of politics bolsters the male-gendered environment and image of political institutions. Given that masculinity is the premise on which politics is constructed and the 'norm' against which all political activity is judged (Connolly, 2013; Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, 1995; Harmer et al, 2017), women entering politics are contrasted against the 'naturalised' male inhabitants (Puwar, 2004) which may attenuate party selectorates' support for women's candidacy and concurrently depress women's supply into politics, curtailing role-model effects, and inhibiting women's confidence and ambition to pursue a political career (Bjarnegård, 2013; Buckley et al, 2015).

Citing research from Lawless and Fox (2005), Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger (2015: 769 – 770) note that 'existing research suggests that both nominations through parties and self-nominations (applications) are gender-biased'.

> 'On the one hand, women with qualifications similar to those of men are less likely than men to hold positive self-perceptions about their ability to stand for office; on the other hand, … nominations by political parties and their leaders tend to favour men over women ... [as well as] favour characteristics typically associated with male candidates (Niven, 1998)' (Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger, 2015: 769 – 770).

Studies of women's candidate emergence and selection show that male gender power arrangements act to encourage male candidacy and encumber that of women (Krook, 2013; Bjarnegård, 2013, Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2015). Yet the role of political parties in creating opportunities for women's candidacy is somewhat paradoxical. On one-hand, gender politics research points to the fact that political parties act as gate-keepers, determining who gets onto the ticket, and documents that party selectorates tend to prefer the male status quo, particularly where candidate selection processes are less formalised and decentralised (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny, 2013; Gauja and Cross, 2015; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2016). But feminist political science also speaks of the role of parties in facilitating women's access to the ballot paper and supporting their candidacy through the provision of campaign supports, funding, canvassing teams and a ready-made network of party supporters (Rule, 1987 and 1994; Lovenduski and Norris, 1993; Kunovich and Paxton, 2005; Celis et al, 2016). Party ideology also matters with left-leaning parties showing a greater willingness to select women candidates (Reynolds, 1999).

To understand this paradox, it is necessary to look beyond the party context to consider how gender permeates systemic institutions, such as the electoral system, and assess how this shapes women's candidate emergence. Taking a feminist institutionalism approach, Krook (2010a: 712) observes three institutional features that shape women's candidacy and election prospects. Firstly, proportional representation (PR) electoral systems enhance women's candidate selection. This is due to the larger district sizes which serve to increase party magnitudes. With more opportunity spaces in a district, political parties are willing to diversify their candidate profile, unlike in single seat majoritarian or plurality electoral systems, where parties tend to stick with the tried and tested, usually male, incumbent. Secondly, given the male dominance of parliaments worldwide, women predominantly fall into the challenger category at election-time. However, the multi-seat districts of PR systems lower the threshold of votes required to get elected which is said to enhance the election prospects of challengers, including women. Thirdly, gender quotas are a significant institutional mechanism that alters the conditions creating a demand for women's candidacy and increasing women's parliamentary representation (Matland, 1998; Caul-Kittilson, 2001, 2005; Schwindt-Bayer, 2005; Salmond, 2006; Thames and Williams, 2010; Dahlerup, 2012; Krook, 2010b).

The impact of political culture norms on women's candidate recruitment is another important factor. Systems that cultivate clientelism, personalism and localism are said to benefit male candidacy (Ballington, 2003). Developing personal relationships, local networks and clientelistic links are vital for campaigning and fundraising. However, fostering these links

takes time, a resource that women and men do not always share in equal measure, given that in most societies, the majority of care work is carried by women. The male dominance of parliaments worldwide ensures more men than women can avail of an incumbency status and benefit from the name-recognition advantages that accrue from such a position.

From this brief review of the literature of women, gender and candidate recruitment, it is clear that party context forms an essential, but just one part, of the gendered institutional landscape shaping women's access to the ballot paper. Yet, all studies taking a broadly institutional approach examine party women only. Similarly, studies analysing women's candidate emergence and selection through the prism of the supply and demand model, focus on party women, albeit understandable, given the curiosity about party demand effects. Examining independent women widens the scope of analysis, and increases understanding about the relationship between gender, institutions and candidate recruitment. It removes the demand or gate-keeping element of political parties, and assesses whether a process of political recruitment that excludes parties, is less inimical to women's candidacy.

The independent route

An independent refers to someone who runs for office on their own, or as a member of a quasi-party or alliance, where there is no party whip (Weeks, 2016: 582). The visibility of independents in electoral politics has increased in recent years, evidenced in the rise of Emmanuel Macron in France in 2017, initially as a non-party candidate prior to the foundation of *La République En Marche*. It points to the growing prominence of the independent route to political candidacy and senior political office. Weeks (2016: 582) calculated that in 2013, close to 40 leading industrial democracies had independent parliamentarians in their national assemblies. Furthermore, independents have experienced prominent electoral successes in gubernatorial and senate elections across the USA, mayoral contests in the UK, and parliamentary elections in Australia and Ireland, and many others have been elected to sub-national parliaments, local councils and territorial assemblies (Weeks, 2016: 580 and 584).

Welbourne (2020 forthcoming) estimates that between 2015 and 2017, 25 countries featured independent female parliamentarians in their national assemblies. Ireland is one of these countries. In his work on independents in Ireland, Weeks (2017) tracks the presence of independents in Irish electoral politics and estimates that in 2017, there were more independent representatives in the Irish parliament, including eleven women[1], than in the rest of the world's assemblies combined. At the 2016 general election in Ireland, 30 per cent (n=162) of all candidates who contested the election were independent. Of these, 40 were women. This makes Ireland an appropriate choice of case-study to examine women independents.

There is a dearth of research on women independents. A literature search on the subject of independents reveals a number of single, cross-country and regional analyses examining such topics as the institutional and cultural factors facilitating independents' emergence in Ireland (Weeks, 2017) and worldwide (Brancati, 2008); the electoral performance of independents in Estonia (Ehin and Solvak, 2012), Japan (Hijino, 2013) and sub-Saharan Africa (Ishiyama et al, 2013); assessments of why independents gain support, how they relate to parties, and how they exercise power in Australian federal and state parliaments (Costar and Curtin, 2004); the parliamentary behaviour of independents in UK national and sub-national assemblies (Copus

et al, 2009; Cowley and Stuart, 2009); the nature of non-partisan ballots in the USA (Schaffner at al, 2001; Crawford, 2018); assessments of how democracies function without parties (Anckar and Anckar, 2000); and identifying various types of independent candidates in Ireland (Weeks, 2009). However, none of these studies examine the topic of independents through a gendered lens.

The only substantial gendered analysis of independents and non-partisan recruitment processes is a chapter in Jenny Chapman's *Politics, Feminism and the Reformation of Gender* (1993) which examines non-partisans in Scottish local government elections. Starting from the premise that male dominance of political elites is virtually universal, Chapman's book undertakes a gendered and comparative study of political recruitment to show that among candidates, irrespective of context and model of candidate recruitment (partisan/non-partisan), the outcome is the same – men are more likely than women to self-nominate and/or be selected by parties to contest election. Regardless of whether a candidate contests an election for a party or as an independent, Chapman highlights socio-economic resources such as educational attainment, occupation, income and property/land ownership as well as time to dedicate to civic duty and community involvement, as the 'independent variable which sorts people into those who are more, and those who are less likely, to see themselves as candidate material' (75). It is not a case that women are less 'qualified' than men to contest election, rather, they experience gender gaps in relation to earning potential and differential access to time to devote to networking activities. Furthermore, Chapman (1993: 77) observes that women experience low self-esteem, surmising that 'few attributes could be considered less appropriate for non-partisan candidacy'. Her overall assessment is that the independent route is an 'unpropitious' one for women. However, regardless the route to candidacy, Chapman argues that if selectors and potential candidates continue to privilege and follow the recruitment norms of the status quo, ie men, then the situation for women will remain unchanged. Without a fundamental alteration in the institutional landscape and the position of men, Chapman (1993:267) concludes that women will remain 'trapped in the scissors of conflicting gender aspirations and identities', not holding the appropriate 'qualifications' for office and simultaneously concerned that the qualifications they do possess are not appropriate (Kenny, 2008:5).

Close to 30 years have lapsed since Chapman's work but in that time only a handful of studies make reference to women independents or non-partisans.

In a reflection of the role of independents in Australia, Curtin (2004: 3) highlights how historically, the independent route was viewed by suffragists as a platform for women's interests as the party system was seen as 'being designed by men to support men's interests'.

In 2020, Middle Eastern and North African states (MENA) are the regional world leader in terms of the number of independent female members of parliament (Welbourne, 2020 forthcoming). The rise in the number of female independents is accredited to changes in the institutional landscape, particularly electoral system change coupled with gender quotas, which has resulted in a new 'kind of personalist politics, which allow for women to enter politics in unexpected ways, often by virtue of informal institutions such as women's social networks' (p.3).

Taking a more behaviouralist approach and examining gender affinity effects among voters in US elections, Badas and Stauffer (2019: 245) find that 'in nonpartisan contexts … candidate sex serves as a representational cue and [leads] to gender affinity effects in vote choice. However, in partisan contexts, all voters … use partisanship as a cue and there … [is] no evidence of gender affinity effects'.

What these limited number of studies reveal is the complex relationship between women, gender, institutions and the independent route to political candidacy. On the one hand we see that the independent route can be an important conduit for the promotion of women's interests and women's political mobilisation (Curtin, 2004 and Welbourne, forthcoming 2020) but conversely, it is observed that the route is no more beneficial to women than the party route so long as those characteristics associated with the emergence of the 'ideal male candidate' remain privileged (Chapman, 1993). The MENA case-study demonstrates the significance of institutional dynamics for women's independent candidacy and highlights the symbolic impact of gender quotas for non-partisan women, showing that the feminisation of a political system through the adoption of gender quotas can act as a mobiliser for women's political engagement, both within and beyond the party system.

The Irish case-study

Independents have been a constant feature of Irish politics since the foundation of the state in 1922, but as Figure 1 demonstrates, their electoral fortunes have varied. From a position of relative prominence in the fledgling years of the new state, as a party system in flux presented opportunities for independent candidates to emerge, the 1960s saw a decline in their electoral support. However, a fragmenting party system since the late 1980s and the advent of anti-establishment politics since the 2000s has seen a resurgence in support for independents (Weeks, 2016: 587-8; Weeks, 2017)[2].

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

A number of institutional and cultural variables facilitate the presence of independents in Irish politics namely Ireland's single transferable vote (PR-STV) electoral system which fosters candidate-centric voting behaviour (Farrell and McAllister, 2006) and Irish political culture which features strong levels of personalism and localism (Coakley, 2018).

Weeks (2017) identifies a number of ways in which PR-STV aids the emergence and election of independents. Firstly, the use of multi-member districts, ranging from three seats to five seats, lowers the threshold of votes required for election, benefitting independents who do not have a party machine behind them to mobilise voters. Secondly, the open candidate lists of PR-STV, which requires voters to indicate their preference through a rank-ordering of candidates, advantages independents, as they may be viewed as 'transfer-friendly' by party voters who may switch 'to independents as a protest, but they have not yet crossed the Rubicon by transferring their partisan allegiance to new parties' (Weeks, 2018: 123; Weeks 2017; Bowler and Farrell, 2017). Thirdly, the preferential and ordinal nature of the electoral system encourages candidate centric voting behaviour, which in turn, incentivises politicians to cultivate personal votes (Farrell and McAllister, 2006: 11). This is said to bolster the electoral prospects of independent candidates.

Political culture interacts with the dynamics of PR-STV to moderate the impact of the party label on voting behaviour, thereby enhancing the prominence of 'the candidate' in voter decision-making and aiding the electoral prospects of independents (Weeks, 2018; Weeks, 2017). Political culture features such as localism and personalism are facilitated by the candidate-centric nature of PR-STV (Coakley, 2018). PR-STV's multi-member districts fosters inter and intra-party rivalry, meaning both party and non-party candidates engage in high levels of constituency work, clientelism and brokerage type politics, hoping that these activities will be rewarded by votes from the electorate.

> 'This is important for independents because most of them lack a national profile, and are almost entirely dependent on their local persona to deliver a vote' (Weeks, 2017: 149).

Furthermore, unlike other countries, ballot access requirements do not present a barrier to independents in Ireland (Brancati, 2008: 651).

As demonstrated in Table 1, independents in Ireland are a rather 'heterogeneous' group (Weeks, 2016: 588).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Despite the depth of research and knowledge about independents in Ireland, very little is known about female independents or how the institutional and cultural dynamics that shape the emergence of independents affects women specifically. In April 2020, female TDs[3] occupy 22.5 per cent of the seats in Dáil Éireann, the lower house of parliament in Ireland. Just 130 women, in comparison to 1211 men have been elected TDs in the history of the state. Of those 130 women, 14 have identified as 'independent' at some stage in their Dáil careers.

A combination of historical, socio-cultural, institutional and individual level effects account for the gender imbalance in Irish politics (Galligan and Buckley, 2018). Political parties have not been a panacea for women's political aspirations. Up to the 1980s, when women were selected to run, the recruitment pattern of the main parties was to primarily opt for women with familial links to the party. Known as the 'widows' and daughters inheritance', these women tended to be 'networked into the political system through male relations, fathers or husbands, who had died while serving in the Dáil' (Buckley and Galligan, 2019: 285). From the 1920s through to the early 1990s, social conservatism and patriarchal attitudes dampened and curtailed women's ambitions and opportunities for political office. However, the election of Mary Robinson as President of Ireland in 1990, the first time a woman occupied the office, heralded a modernising Ireland. The involvement of women in her campaign success motivated political parties to reach out to women, recruiting them into their party ranks. The practice of 'the inheritance' remained, but was no longer the sole recruitment avenue for women into party candidacy.

> 'In the 1992 general election, the first held after the 1990 presidential election, there was a 71 per cent increase in female candidacy, up from 52 women candidates in 1989 to 89 in 1992. With more women on the ballot paper, the number of women elected increased by 54 per cent, up from 13 women TDs in

> 1989 to 20 in 1992. It seemed that Mary Robinson's election as president was the much-needed catalyst for change in Irish political party candidate selection processes' (Buckley and Galligan, 2019: 286).

However, nearly twenty years later in 2011, the number of women elected to Dáil Éireann had increased marginally to 25. While women's membership of political parties hovered between 30 and 40 per cent, their rate of candidacy at general elections averaged just 15 per cent. It was clear that some form of interventionist measure was required to incentivise political parties to select women candidates at election time. This intervention came in the form of the *Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012* which stipulates that political parties must select at least 30 per cent female candidates and at least 30 per cent male candidates at general elections; if they do not, they will lose 50 per cent of a subsidy they receive from the state on an annual basis to run their operations. The gender quota threshold is due to rise to 40 per cent from 2023 onwards. The law was implemented for the first time at the 2016 general election and resulted in a 40 per cent increase in the number of women elected to Dáil Éireann.

Research Design

To address the research lacuna identified in this paper, two databases are created. Firstly, an Ireland Elections Dataset[4] of all female candidates for Dáil Éireann elections in 2007, 2011, and 2016 is developed from publicly available data. Across these three elections, there was a total of 330 female candidacies including 259 party (78.5 per cent) and 71 independent (21.5 per cent) candidacies. Variables examined include biographical (occupation, age, marital status, parenthood status, family in politics), political experience (elected office experience, current/previous party affiliation) and electoral information (campaign expenditure, first preference vote, constituency size, incumbency status). The second database identifies all 181 women who ever contested a general election in Ireland as an independent candidate between 1922 and 2016, and notes their name, constituency, year of election and platform on which they contested election[5].

As well as its empirical offerings, the paper presents some theoretical and analytical contributions.

Firstly, studying independents removes party demand effects from calculations affording an opportunity to learn more about the individual level factors that shape the supply of women in coming forward as election candidates. The characteristics of independent women are outlined and the factors relevant to their mobilisation and emergence are identified to sketch a picture of who are the women who run as independents and why.

Secondly, cognisant that the end of parties is not nigh, this enquiry, specifically a comparison of independent and party women, may be illuminating in revealing something about the particular characteristics in a party woman's personal demographic and/or political biography that are valued or demanded by political parties, aiding their selection prospects. While there is an extensive range of studies

> 'focusing on gendered aspects of party recruitment … these studies … emphasise the difficulties in accessing information about internal candidate selection

> decision-making, partly because of the often informal and "hidden" character of these practices' (Bjarnegård and Kenny, 2014: 4).

Through a comparison of party and independent women, this paper offers a novel approach to address, somewhat, this short-coming and shed light on the 'secret garden' of candidate selection (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988).

Thirdly, this gendered analysis pays attention to the individual, institutional and political cultural features that shape the emergence of independents to query if these may encumber or enhance female candidacy. The question is posed: is the independent route easier for women, with less gendered barriers or are the barriers just different? In so doing, the paper contributes to a wider agenda of examining the relationship between gender, institutions and candidate recruitment.

Data and Findings

Who are the women who contest election as independent candidates?

In total, there have been 181 female independent candidacies between 1922 and 2016 (see Figure 2) accounting for 11 per cent of all independent candidacies in Irish general elections.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 reveals the heterogeneity of women independents. When women contest election as independent candidates, they tend to do so most frequently on ideological grounds (35.4 per cent) and community issues (29.3 per cent). Being a member of a quasi-party, a group that may call itself 'a party' but may not be an actually registered party or impose a party whip, accounts for 26.5 per cent of women's independent candidacies. Running for election as an apostate describes the candidacies of 8.8 per cent of independent women. These are candidates who contested the previous election as a party candidate but subsequently left that party over some disagreement or policy difference. In total, over a third of women independents are categorised as quasi-parties and apostates. Coupled with the fact that close to 30 per cent of independent women are mobilised to run due to a community issue, the data shows that institutional political structures and local networks are a significant recruitment route for non-party women, mirroring the access routes of their party counterparts.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Overall, between 1922 and 2016, one-in-five women independents (n=37; 20.4 per cent) contested election on a gendered issue, with the issues ranging from women's political and social rights to the rights of the unborn, and from economic, financial and domestic concerns to the interests of Irish Housewives and Army wives. Notably, in the general elections of 1937 and 1943, all women independents ran on a platform highlighting the need to protect women's economic, social and political status. These elections took place against the backdrop of the new constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann, a document reflecting the social conservatism, clerical influences and nationalistic leanings of 1930s Ireland, tendencies that were not particularly empowering of women. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, one of four

independent women who contested the 1943 general election spoke of 'the party machine' as 'male' and 'allergic' to women'. As Ward (2017) elaborates:

> 'During the campaign against the 1937 Constitution feminists set up the Women's Social and Progressive League to scrutinise and challenge legislation emanating from the Dáil. … Hanna [Sheehy-Skeffington] was a candidate in South Dublin. Her election address included demands for equal work, equal opportunities for women, the removal of the marriage ban on teachers, doctors and other skilled women, the restoration of jury rights, the abolition of the means test, proper pensions, school meals and free books for school children, family allowances, a clean milk supply, an effective anti-TB campaign, and civilised treatment for the unemployed. It was, as she said, a "bold enough challenge to masculine monopoly"'.

Similar to the Australian experience, the independent route provided a safety valve for women's candidacy and a platform for feminist activism[6] in the fledgling years of the new Irish state when the dominant political and public discourses rendered women and their needs inconsequential.

Turning attention to the 2007, 2011 and 2016 general elections specifically, it is observed that women independents are more likely to contest in 5-seat constituencies (39.4 per cent) than in 4-seat constituencies (36.6 per cent) or 3-seat constituencies (23.9 per cent). Of those elected, 50 per cent were elected from 5-seat constituencies, 37.5 per cent from 4-seat constituencies and 12.5 per cent from 3-seat constituencies. The findings demonstrate that district size matters for the electoral prospects of independent women.

Close to 38 per cent of women independents who contested the 2007, 2011 and 2016 general elections had experience of holding elected office but just nine per cent were classified as incumbent. Of those elected, all had experience of serving in a political office, with 87.5 per cent serving in local government and 75 per cent being an incumbent TD at the time of their election. Generally, well-known candidates and incumbents are 'saturated' (Jacobson, 1978: 479) in traits such as name recognition and prior political experience, which aid their vote-getting and fund-raising capacities. It is little wonder then that the average first preference vote (FPV) and campaign expenditure of winning independents is significantly higher than that of all female independents. While the average FPV of women independent candidates was 1837, those elected secured an average of 5604 votes. In terms of campaign expenditure, €8,913 was the average campaign spend by woman independent candidates, with the amount increasing to an average of €16,082.83 for those elected.

Examining the demographics of women independents who contested the 2007, 2011 and 2016 general elections reveals that the average age of women independent candidates is 48.5[7] with the average age of those elected rising to 55.5. Some 84.2 per cent of women independents were married and 83.7 per cent have children. Of those elected, 37.5 per cent have children. In terms of educational attainment, of the known cases, 94.5 per cent of women independents were third level (university) educated with 87.5 per cent of those elected holding a third level qualification. Just under 38 per cent of women independents

were categorised as working in higher professional and/or managerial occupations. 12.5 per cent of women independents had/have family in politics.

Are women independents different or similar to their party counterparts?
Reviewing the profiles of all women who contested the 2007, 2011 and 2016 general elections reveals that a total of 330 women contested these elections including 71 independent (21.5 per cent) and 259 party candidates (78.5 per cent). Women independents (39.4 per cent) are more likely than party women (32.4 per cent) to contest 5-seat constituencies. Of those elected, 50 per cent of women independents are elected from 5 seat constituencies in comparison to just 31 per cent of party women. The FPV of winning women independents is lower than that of party women (5,604 versus 7,309) largely due to the propensity of independent women to contest and win in 5 seat constituencies where the required threshold of votes to win is lower.

While just nine per cent of independent women contesting these elections were incumbents, 21 per cent of party women were. However, of those women independents elected, 75 per cent were incumbent in comparison to just 46 per cent of elected party women. When comparing data on previous political office experience, 60.7 per cent of party women had experience of elected office in comparison to just 37.5 per cent of independent women. However, 100 per cent of independent women who were elected had experience of elected office in comparison to 93.2 per cent of elected party women. Just under 88 per cent of women independent TDs had experience of local government in comparison to 81 per cent of party women TDs.

When electing independent women, it would seem a premium is placed on incumbency and on previous office-holding experience, particularly local experience, pointing to the importance of name recognition and local visibility, or personalism and localism, for their election. Incumbency for party women, while important for selection, seems less prevalent to their electoral success. This may be a case of 'candidate centred but party wrapped' (Marsh, 2000) voting behaviour whereby party candidates can reap electoral benefits from riding on the coattails of their party label, but simultaneously risk punishment when the party experiences a voter backlash.

In terms of campaign finance, on average, party women spend €11,830.40 of their own resources on their campaigns in comparison to €8,913 by independent women, a differential of €2917.40. However, when only those who are elected are examined, there is little or no difference in the funding raised by the two types of candidates (winning women independents: €16,082.83; winning party women: €16,069.32). As party candidates can avail of funding from their parties, when this is factored in, €18,557.85 is the average campaign spend per elected female party candidate.

At the individual level, party women tend to be younger than their independent counterparts. The average age of female party candidates is 44.9[8] while the average age of those elected is 44.3. The comparable ages for independent women are 48.5 and 55.5 respectively. Over three-quarters of party women have children in comparison to 84 per cent of independent women candidates but when examining elected women only, we observe that 82.4 per cent of party women TDs have children in comparison to just 37.5 per cent of independent women

TDs. Analysis of professional background reveals that 62.5 per cent of party women work in higher professional and/or managerial occupations in comparison to just 37.7 per cent of independent women

When examining familial links, 22 per cent of female party candidates had/have family in politics in comparison to 12.5 per cent of independent women candidates. Of those elected, close to 30 per cent of elected party women had/have family in politics in comparison to 25 per cent of elected women independents.

What do we learn about women and party selection processes by viewing it through the lens of independent candidacy?
Assuming that all women who contested the 2007, 2011 and 2016 elections were motivated to run and had an interest in politics, a comparison of independent women candidates and those selected by political parties allows us to isolate those resources that party selectorates privilege in candidate selection. From this analysis, it would seem that incumbency, previous elected office experience and familial links are criteria that party selectors look for in a candidate. While incumbency and previous elected office experience are indicators of candidate quality, familial links may point to the enduring presence of internal party fiefdoms, or legacies of these, which continue to play a role in determining who are the women preferred by political parties.

Is the independent route easier for women, with less gendered barriers or are the barriers just different?
From an institutional perspective, studies of gender, PR-STV and elections find that when women are on the ballot paper, the mechanics of the Irish electoral system are relatively female-friendly and conducive to their election (McGing, 2013). Also, the use of multi-member districts lowers the threshold of votes required for election, an institutional feature favourable to women's election (McGing, 2013; White, 2006) and one that is also found to benefit independents (Weeks, 2018).

However Schwindt-Bayer et al (2010: 707) concluded that there are no advantages of being a woman under STV elections in Ireland surmising that 'no individual, party or district characteristics benefit female candidates more than male candidates with the same characteristics'. They advise that the negative bias against female candidates is compounded by the fact that 'female candidates are particularly challenged when they run in incumbent-dominant districts' (p.707). Given that 91 per cent of women independents in 2007, 2011 and 2016 entered the race as challengers, Schwindt-Bayer et al's finding offers little reassurance for female independents.

Furthermore, the preferential and ordinal nature of the electoral system encourages candidate centric voting behaviour, which in turn, incentivises politicians to cultivate personal votes. While this is said to bolster the electoral prospects of independent candidates (Weeks, 2018), Thames and Williams (2010) find that candidate centric electoral systems are disadvantageous to women's political representation.

At an individual level, time is a valuable resource for anyone wishing to carve out a career in politics, especially in Ireland where localism and personalism is so ingrained in the political

culture. Analysis of the 2019 local elections emphasises the significance of 'local visibility' in candidate recruitment practices. This is often manifested through holding a position of responsibility in a civil society, community organisation or local sporting association (Cullen and McGing, 2019: 13), an effective means for developing a local base and network of potential supporters. However, it demands a lot of time, a resource that women and men don't share in equal measure as research from the Central Statistics Office (2017) demonstrates. They found that of those looking after home/family in Ireland in 2016, 98 per cent were women and women work less hours than men in paid employment outside the home. As a result, more women than men are time poor, as well as financially less well off, meaning the pursuit of a political career may not be a possibility for many women, or, at the very least, women face lifestyle choices about career and family that men oftentimes do not. These are issues that face all political women, party and none, but whereas party women can rely somewhat on a party machine for support, such as canvassing teams and election materials, independent women cannot, which compounds their time and financial deficits.

Taken together, the findings of this study leads to the conclusion that the independent route is no more advantageous nor no less gendered for women than the party route. At the individual level, similar to their party counterparts, independent women face gendered barriers in their decision to run. Moreover, beyond the boundaries of political parties, the wider institutional framework, such as electoral systems and political culture, have gendered dimensions that shape opportunity structures for women's candidate emergence.

Discussion and conclusion

This nascent study of women independents contributes to a research agenda that seeks to examine the wider relationship between gender, women, institutions and candidate recruitment. Thus far studies have concentrated on the gendered aspects of party recruitment highlighting their gate-keeping limitations for women's candidacy. This study shows that women are willing to put themselves forward for election and *go it alone* without the support of a party organisation, but beyond party boundaries, candidate emergence, recruitment and electoral success sits within a wider institutional and cultural context, including electoral systems and political culture, that shape opportunities for candidates. These opportunity structures, however, are not free of gendered consequences. A review of the personal and political biographies of women independents demonstrates that localism, personalism, incumbency and district size are pertinent to their candidate emergence and electoral success. It demonstrates a continuing privileging of established candidate recruitment norms that are biased towards the credentials of typical male candidates leading to the conclusion that the independent route is no easier for women than the party path, and that the wider institutional framework in which candidate recruitment rests, has gendered consequences for women's candidacy. This situation will remain unchanged unless there is a fundamental shift in the criteria for recruitment.

The study also sheds light on those women who become politicised, party and non-party. For the most part, these two groups of women look quite similar – they tend to be middle-aged, married, have children, hold a third level (university) qualification and are steeped in local activism. While categorised within the middle-age bracket, independent women do tend to be older than their party counterparts, indicating that *going alone* without the support of a party organisation may require delaying political ambitions to an older age due to personal

circumstances or a need to build up political and financial resources. On the latter, party women are over 1.5 times more likely than independent women to work in higher professional and managerial professions, which may help explain how they expend, on average, €2,917.40 more in personal campaign finance than independent women. Overall, the data highlights that the recruitment pool of women candidates is quite limited and lacks diversity. The sequential effects of this for the lived experiences that are brought to bear on political decision-making merit further study.

A comparison of independent and party women highlights that incumbency, previous elected office experience and familial links are prominent attributes in the candidacies of party women. While incumbency and previous elected office experience confer candidate quality, it would seem that political parties continue to privilege women with dynastic links. Consequently, the secret garden of party candidate selection continues to be circumscribed by conventional gender recruitment norms, demonstrating the necessity of legislative gender quotas, not alone to level the playing pitch between party men and women, but also among party women, giving those women with no family connections, a fair chance at selection.

The advent of gender quotas contributes too to feminising the political system and making it more open to women's candidacies, but as this study shows, not just within parties. The 2016 general election marked an all-time high for the number of women contesting a general election as an independent candidate. Generally, as the overall number of women contesting Irish elections increases, so too does the number of women independents. The introduction of a gender quota law saw a 90 per cent increase in overall women's candidacy, with the numbers of women contesting the general election as an independent doubling between 2011 and 2016. A similar increase was observed between the 1989 and 1992 general elections which saw a 111 per cent increase in independent female candidacy. Common to both the 1992 and 2016 general elections is the so-called feminising of both elections; in 1992 as a result of the post-Mary Robinson presidential election victory and in 2016 as a result of the legislative gender quota. It would seem that when the party system, and by extension the political system is viewed as more welcoming of women candidates, this has a diffusion effect beyond party boundaries, mobilising non-party women to put themselves forward for election. This contrasts with the earlier assessment that the independent route provided a 'safety valve' for those women who felt unwelcome or unrepresented by Irish political parties. Temporal and contextual specificities explain these differential gendered effects.

Overall, the study finds that institutions matter in independent candidate emergence. Ireland's PR-STV electoral system, multi-member districts, ease of ballot access and associated lower vote thresholds all aid the emergence and election of women independents. However, as noted previously, these are not without their gendered effects. While the advent of gender quotas does not impact independent women directly, it would seem that a feminising of the institutional landscape has an indirect impact, mobilising independent women to run. The study also reveals that political institutional structures remain important for independent women's candidate emergence. Some 35 per cent of women independents were classified as quasi-party or former party members suggesting that even the independent route to political office, which may be viewed as an alternative avenue for women's political activism, is heavily shaped by conventional candidate recruitment channels.

The small 'n' size and the cultural, contextual and institutional features of the Irish case-study negates against generalizability. However, this study expands the research agenda on gender, institutions and candidate recruitment by exploring these dynamics beyond the party fold and reveals that women's candidacy, party and none, is circumscribed by institutional dynamics that are far from gender neutral. At the individual level, women also continue to face gendered barriers in their decision to run for office. To extend these tentative findings, future research will bring men into focus as it is only by examining the institutional and individual level dynamics of men's candidate recruitment, both independent and party, that a complete picture of candidate recruitment processes emerges, and the gendered consequences of this for women's candidacy can be fully understood.

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There is no conflict of interest.

Author biography
Fiona Buckley is a lecturer in the Department of Government and Politics, University College Cork, Ireland where she specialises in gender politics.

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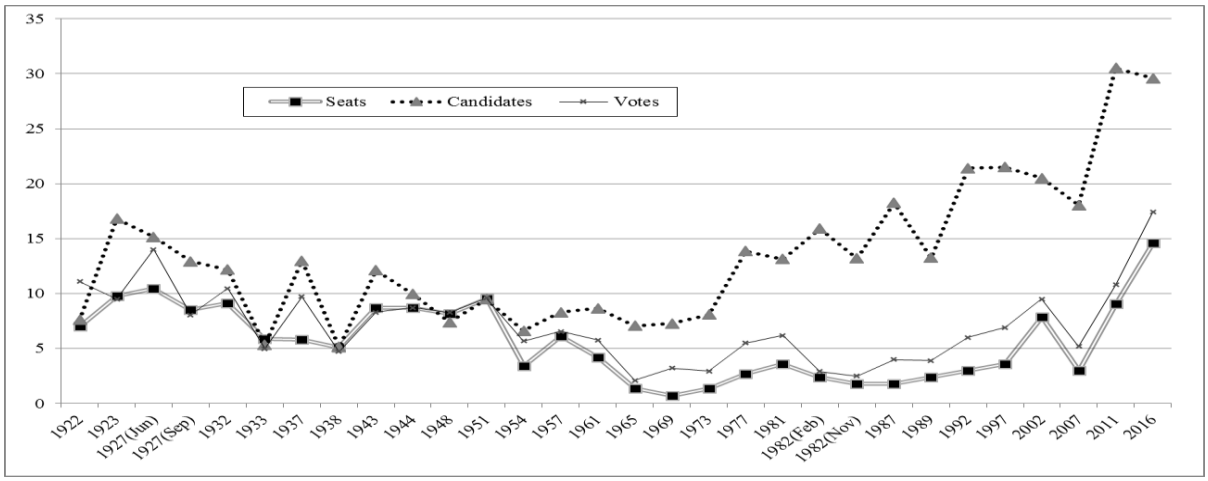
Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Independents as a proportion of votes, seats and candidates, Irish general elections, 1922 - 2016



Source: Reproduced from Weeks, L. (2017) *Independents in Irish Party Democracy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 68.

Figure 2: Number of female independent candidates, 1922 – 2016

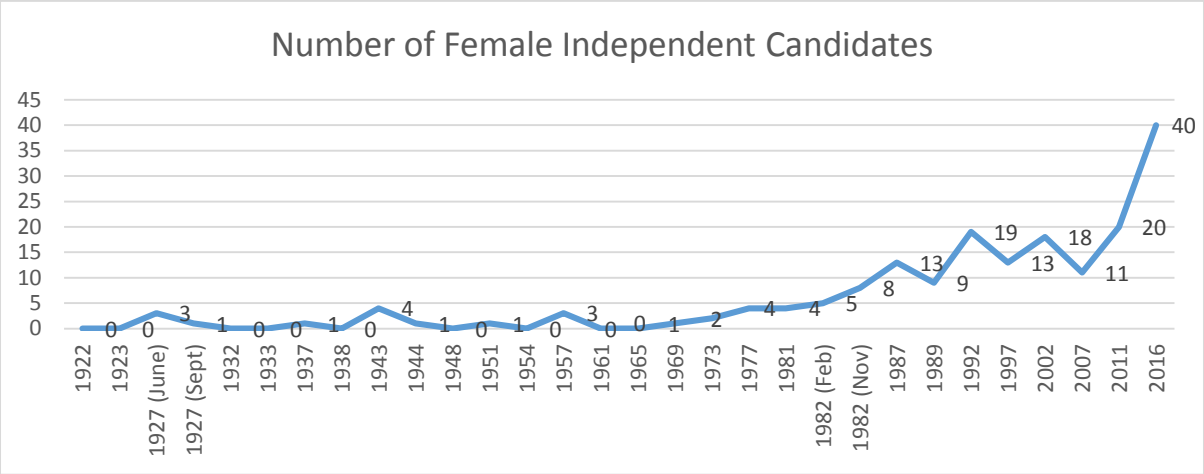


Table 1 Weeks' typology of independents contesting Irish general elections, 1922 – 2016

	Candidates (N)	***Seats won (N)***
Apostate Independents[9]	177	41
Community Independents[10]	724	48
Corporatist Independents[11]	91	33
Independent farmers	*(60)*	*(24)*
Independent business	*(31)*	*(9)*
Ideological	404	58
Independent Republican	*(63)*	*(17)*
Left-wing	*(137)*	*(35)*
National single-issue	*(204)*	*(6)*
Quasi-parties[12]	150	16
Vestigial Independents[13]	100	63
Independent unionists	*(69)*	*(43)*
Vestigial – other	*(31)*	*(20)*
Total	**1646**	**259**

Note: data for table sourced from Weeks (2017: 31 – 32)

Table 2 Classification of women independents contesting Irish general elections, 1922 – 2016

	N	***%***
Apostate Independents	16	8.8
Community Independents	53	29.3
Ideological - *Independent Republican - 6* **Ideological** - *Left-wing - 12* **Ideological -** *National general issue - 46* *(Gendered issue affecting women - 19)*	64 *(19)*	35.4
Quasi-parties *(Gendered issue affecting women)*	48 *(18)*	26.5
Total *(Gendered issue affecting women)*	**181** *(37)*	*(20.4)*

Note: categorisations adapted from Weeks (2017)

[1] In 2016, five female independents were elected to the lower house of parliament, Dáil Éireann, while another six female independents was elected/appointed to serve in the upper house, Seanad Éireann.

[2] The effective number of political parties in the Irish party system has fluctuated between 2.5 and 4.93 at parliamentary level and between 2.5 and 6.57 at electoral level since the 1980s, with the 2016 general election being the most fragmented ever recorded in Ireland (Gallagher, 2016: 126).

[3] TD refers to Teachta Dála – member of parliament

[4] Data was drawn from publicly available data on candidate and party web sites; the *Nealon's Guide* series; the website http://electionsireland.org; Adrian Kavanagh Database, Maynooth University https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2014/10/22/officially-declared-candidates-for-the-20152016-general-election/ and profiles of candidates in Irish newspapers such as the *Irish Times*. Candidate spending data was obtained from the Standards in Public Office Commission.

[5] Data primarily sourced from the independents' database of Liam Weeks, University College Cork, and supplemented with details drawn from candidates' social media accounts and *Nealon's Guides* (1973 - 2017).

[6] Aside from the *Women's Social and Progressive League,* other examples of feminist activism and women's mobilisation in the period between 1922 and November 1982 include the Irish Women's Citizens' Association (1927); the Irish Housewives' Association (1957) and the Women's Political Association (1977, 1982).

[7] Demographical information about independent women is based on 38 known cases or 53.5 per cent of all women independents in the 2007 – 2016 period.

[8] Demographical information about party women is based on 190 known cases or 73.4 per cent of all party women in the 2007 – 2016 period.

[9] Apostate independents or party rebels are those who sought a party nomination but were not selected or are those who previously contested an election for a political party but left the party over policy/personal difficulties

[10] Community independents are those who aim to advance the interests of their constituency

[11] Corporatist independents are those who campaign on economic interests such as business and farming

[12] Independents running for quasi-parties are groups of independents who come together to form alliances or loosely arranged 'parties'

[13] Vestigial independents, more prominent in the early years of the state's existence, largely consist of independent unionist politicians