

125 years of local democracy in Ireland

Fergal O’Leary

Institute of Public Administration

Introduction

With political parties and independents gearing up for local elections on 7 June, the coming weeks will witness a flurry of electioneering across Ireland by candidates and canvassers. The election of thirty-one new councils, which play a representative, policymaking and supervisory role, is fundamental to Ireland’s system of local government.

Local elections see people, experienced in local affairs and involved in local groups and organisations, elected to councils to work in the interests of their communities. Elections enliven local politics by stimulating public debate and discussion on matters affecting people in their everyday lives. Many councillors are re-elected who possess invaluable knowledge and experience of issues on the ground, while new councillors are also elected, bringing fresh ideas and energy to council chambers across the country.

This year (2024) marks 125 years since the first local elections took place in Ireland in 1899. Ireland and its society have been transformed since the late nineteenth century, and the country continues to experience considerable change. Indeed, much can happen over the five years between local elections, with new political and societal issues emerging for voters to consider at election time. Ahead of 7 June, this

article briefly looks at past local elections, and some of the changes and issues that have influenced the election process.

Very brief history of local elections

Since the introduction of a two-tiered system of councils by the Local Government Act of 1898, which was also accompanied by the extension of the franchise, twenty-five local elections have been held in Ireland. In the context of the unsettled national question, elections in the early decades of the twentieth century took place in a politically tense and violent atmosphere.¹ Over time, as the heightened tension and bitterness of this period receded, local politics and elections became more prosaic. Economic programmes from the 1950s were instrumental in modernising an independent Ireland, with the societal change of the 1960s and 1970s perhaps reflected by attitudes towards local politics. Commenting on a 'good tempered and orderly' election campaign, the *Connaught Telegraph's* editor in 1974 stated: 'It is obvious that people have become more sophisticated and that politics in local elections are not now deemed as important and contentious as it used to be' (*Connaught Telegraph*, 1974).

Before 1953, local elections were supposed to take place every three years, but following legislative change, elections thereafter were to be held every five years. However, the holding of scheduled local elections was not always guaranteed. Since the early 1920s, no fewer than fifteen local elections have been postponed by governments for one reason or another; for example, the need to restructure local government or due to the proximity of other elections (e.g. a presidential election).²

Over the years, government decisions to postpone local elections have been met with healthy scepticism from political opponents. There were different strands to the arguments against a postponement. Critics often dismissed what they believed to be spurious claims by the government of the day, suspecting that political factors were at play. For instance, in 1984, there were heated exchanges in the Dáil as opposition politicians lambasted the government's decision. 'They [the local elections] are not being postponed because of the need for local government reform. They are being postponed because of the inept performance of the

¹ For more, see Weeks and Quinlivan, 2009.

² For more, see Weeks and Quinlivan, 2009; Greene, 2003.

Government’, argued one TD (Dáil Éireann, 1984a), while another asserted that the government knew it was on a ‘suicidal course’ if the local elections went ahead (Dáil Éireann, 1984b). Indeed, Aodh Quinlivan, a politics lecturer at University College Cork, describes local elections as ‘mid-term contests ... typically used to give a bloody nose to the incumbent central government’ (Quinlivan, 2015). There was also a sense that postponing elections highlighted a contemptuous attitude towards local democracy. For example, during a 1972 Dáil debate, it was stated that frequent postponements diminished the ‘status and standing’ of local councils (Dáil Éireann, 1972), while in 1992, a political party official publicly denounced another postponed election arguing that ‘democracy delayed is democracy denied’ (*Drogheda Independent*, 1992). However, a referendum in 1999, which gave constitutional recognition to the role of local government, ended the ability of governments to defer local elections as Article 28A of Bunreacht na hÉireann (Irish Constitution) now makes it clear that elections must take place every five years.

Reforms affecting local elections

In more recent decades, several reforms designed to modernise aspects of local government have significantly impacted councillors and, by extension, have had implications for local elections. For example, ahead of the 2004 elections, the dual mandate was scrapped meaning that members of the Oireachtas could no longer run in local elections; while in 2008, spending limits for local-election candidates – in line with rules for general and European elections – were brought in.

The *Putting People First* era reforms also had a major influence.³ The abolition of town councils in 2014, which ended the second tier of local government, meant that some councillors no longer served on town councils and county councils. In addition, this rationalisation resulted in far fewer seats for local election candidates to fight over as the total number of councillors fell from 1,627 to 949.

Reforms, in some shape or form, will continue, helping to improve and modernise local democracy. For example, the possible introduction of gender quotas for elections, additional directly elected mayors or territory restructures will help keep local politics and

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5655c2-putting-people-first-action-programme-for-effective-local-government/>

elections vibrant. The right reforms are essential to maintain a modern and fit-for-purpose local government at the heart of the country's democratic system. And in the context of a rapidly increasing population, growing demand for public services and severe policy delivery challenges, there is a pressing need to look at fundamentally reforming local government in terms of functions, powers, and resources.⁴

Issues at local elections

While local elections are considered 'second order elections', like referendums, European elections and presidential elections, they are never fully divorced from national matters. A range of local and national issues, to varying degrees, generate political excitement during campaigns. For example, concerns about local services and facilities (e.g. lack of playgrounds or adult education resources) often exercise the minds of voters, while in recent local election campaigns, austerity and housing were prominent national-level issues (Quinlivan, 2020). Naturally, political priorities shift over time as different issues become relevant in people's lives. For example, it is widely expected that immigration will be a salient issue at the 2024 local elections, perhaps further fragmenting Irish politics.⁵

Turnout at local elections

The individuals elected as public representatives at local elections can have a significant bearing on communities through their statutory functions. However, despite the councillors' impact on local services, voter turnout at local elections is relatively low. Table 1 below shows that voter turnout at local elections has declined over the past fifty years from 62 per cent to 50 per cent.

However, a continuous fall in voter turnout did not occur from one election to the next as the 1979 election saw an increase of 2 per cent and in 2004 there was a jump of 9 per cent. The lowest turnout was 50 per cent, experienced at both the 1999 and 2019 local elections. This contrasts with general elections which have consistently attracted a

⁴ For an international perspective, see the latest monitoring report on the application of the European Charter of Local Self Government in Ireland (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, 2023).

⁵ For more, see Ryan (2024) and Loscher (2024)

Table 1: Voter turnout at local elections over the past 50 years

<i>Year</i>	<i>Turnout</i>
1974	62%
1979	64%
1985	60%
1991	56%
1999	50%
2004	59%
2009	58%
2014	52%
2019	50%

Source: Institute for Public Administration, 2023.

turnout exceeding 60 per cent. With local elections failing to capture the imagination of voters, in comparison to general elections, it perhaps highlights how some people perceive local government as having little impact on their lives.

Much has been written about the low voter turnout at the last set of local elections. Seán Ó Riordáin, Director of the Public Policy Advisors Network, observed that nearly one in two voters opted not to exercise their mandate in 2019, Ó Riordáin seeing it as part of a worrying trend that needs to be explored. If local government had responsibility for a wider range of service areas, he argued that more people might be interested in electing their local public representatives (Ó Riordáin, 2019). There was also a clear rural–urban divide in the turnout figures for the local electoral areas. According to Aodh Quinlivan, the voter turnout in 2019 was ‘significantly higher’ in the rural parts of the country; the highest turnout recorded nationally was in Ballinamore (County Leitrim) with 66.85 per cent, whereas the lowest turnout was in Tallaght South (Dublin) at 26.9 per cent (Quinlivan, 2020).

A host of factors influence whether people turn out to vote on election day or not. Adrian Kavanagh and William Durkan (2020) have written about voter turnout in ‘first order’ and ‘second order’ elections in Ireland, noting that the places and contexts within which voters live and work can lead to different turnouts in different areas. Some of the socio-economic, demographic, political, and institutional factors which explain why turnouts in areas might differ are outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Factors usually associated with higher or lower turnouts

<i>Higher turnout</i>	<i>Lower turnout</i>
Older populations	Younger populations
Married people	Single or separated people
Residential stability	Population mobility
Rurally based/Agricultural employment	Urban-based employment
Affluence/High levels of social well-being	Social deprivation
High levels of education	Low education standards
Proximity to the polling station	Distance from the polling station
High levels of political choice	Low levels of political choice
Weekend voting	Voting on weekdays

Source: Kavanagh & Durkan, 2020.

Improving women participation

For representative democracy, whether at the local or national level, to be more representative of society, ongoing work to improve participation is required. Efforts have been made in recent years to increase the number of women participating in local elections which have borne positive results. For instance, the number of female local election candidates in 2019 was in the region of 560, an increase of around 7 per cent on the 2014 figure. Of these candidates, 225 female councillors were elected in 2019 (23.7 per cent of the total), an increase on the 196 councillors elected in 2014 (20.6 per cent of the total). For 2024, it is hoped that this upward trend will continue as female representation in local politics is still quite low.

To this end, there have been calls by activist groups to introduce gender quotas for local elections, similar to quotas for general elections (Molony, 2023). But quotas on their own are not enough to improve levels of female participation in local elections, addressing specific barriers and providing supports are also key. In recent years, the introduction of legislation enabling councillors to avail of maternity leave was an important step, along with new allowances for administrative support and personal security. Furthermore, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to improve female participation in the local election process, provides funding for information workshops and the provision of training and capacity-building programmes (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2023). The need to promote the participation of women, and marginal groups like travellers and migrants, in local democracy is clear, especially in the context of an increasingly equal and diverse society.

Conclusion

Local elections, which underpin local democracy, succeed in generating political excitement at the local level with campaigns fought on a range of issues, and 2024 will be no different. While individuals are elected to local councils to essentially oversee local administrative matters, national issues – like health, or housing or immigration, for example – often have a bearing during local election campaigns. Commentators often view election results, rightly or wrongly, as a barometer of the fortunes of political parties before a general election.

Being able to elect public representatives who manage local affairs should never be taken for granted. However, many factors influence whether people cast their vote or not. Certainly, the trend of declining voter turnouts is concerning. While important work to increase the number of female candidates continues, there must also be a focus on trying to arrest the trend of low turnouts at local elections. People must be encouraged to pay greater attention to local election campaigns and to vote for their preferred candidates. A stronger local government, with devolved functions, powers, and more resources, is perhaps the best way to achieve this.

A rapidly growing population, which has greater expectations in terms of public services, combined with acute delivery challenges in key policy areas, should support the argument in the coming years to reform and enhance Ireland's local government system. By following through on significant reforms, a government will strengthen local democracy and the ability of local councils to address issues facing communities. This can only help to reinvigorate public interest in local politics and increase participation in future elections.

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