

## **Abstract**

See Her Elected which is part of Longford Women's Link is a programme that supports women in rural Ireland to be candidates in local elections. We will be watching one aspect of the forthcoming general and seanad elections very carefully. Every councillor that gets elected to Dáil Éireann or Seanad Éireann will leave a vacant council seat in their wake. By our count, **57** vacancies were created this way between the 2019 and 2024 local elections. The people selected to fill those soon to be vacated council seats will enjoy an electoral advantage as incumbents in the 2029 local elections. Crucially for SHE, an analysis of the 2024 election results tells us that not only are incumbents much more likely than new candidates to be elected, but also that the electorate do not distinguish by gender when it comes to voting for incumbents.

## **Introduction**

See Her Elected's analysis of the 2024 local election results confirms that voters are extremely loyal when it comes to voting for incumbents. Incumbents are defined as outgoing members of local authorities contesting a local election. Put another way, they are the candidates running to keep their council seat for another five-year term. Of the 2,172 candidates on ballot papers on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2024, **806** of them were running to keep their seats. **684**, or 85% of those incumbent candidates were successful, winning 72% of the 949 council seats up for grabs. The over-representation of men in the incumbent category, especially in rural Ireland means that the **684** council seats won by incumbents went 76% to men and 24% to women. However, disaggregating this statistic by gender tell us that of the **806** candidates running with incumbent status, **206** of them were women, and **166** (81%) of those incumbent women were elected. This is comparable to the 86% of male incumbent candidates elected (**518** successful male incumbents elected from **600** male incumbent candidates). On the evidence provided by the 2024 election data, the electoral advantage enjoyed by incumbents is irrespective of the gender of that incumbent.

## **Co-options**

In this paper we focus on a subset of incumbent councillors that we refer to as co-opted incumbents. These councillors were not elected to their seats in the 2019 local elections. Instead gained a seat over the 2019-2024 election cycle through a process called co-option.

Unlike vacancies that occur in the Dáil and which require a by-election, vacancies in councils are filled through a process called co-option. Where the person vacating their county council seat is a member of a political party, legislation allows for that seat to be filled by the party. Each party will have their own procedures on how that new councillor

is selected. Standing orders in a local authority usually dictate what happens when an independent non-party councillor seat becomes vacant.

Between the 2019 and 2024 local elections, we calculate that 144 councillors were co-opted into vacate council seats. This number counts all the double co-options, i.e. where a co-opted councillor themselves resigned mid-term, requiring a second councillor to be co-opted into the same seat. It excludes those temporarily in place to cover maternity leave.

Vacancies for council seats can happen for a variety of reasons. Between the 2019 and 2024 local elections these were:

	<b>Cllr. Died*</b>	<b>Elected TD</b>	<b>Became MEP</b>	<b>Resigned</b>	<b>Retired</b>	<b>Became Senator</b>	<b>Won 2 seats</b>	
<b>Men</b>	14	30	3	26	10	8	1	92
<b>Women</b>	0	7	0	29	3	12	1	52
<b>Total</b>	14	37	3	55	13	20	2	144

*Table 1: Reasons co-options happened*

*\* Excludes councillors who died without a subsequent co-option taking place, which was the case in two vacancies.*

There are advantages and disadvantages to being a co-opted councillor, come election time. They are, in effect, a first-time candidate without the experience of running a successful local election campaign. Learning how a Council works can be time-consuming and can leave a co-opted incumbent unprepared for an election. Theoretically, they are vulnerable to losing out to new candidates who can present themselves as a fresh face with new ideas.

But the benefit of being a co-opted councillor at election time is that they have been given the opportunity to build up contacts and a profile, and time to develop an electoral base. Sitting councillors running for election have automatic name recognition and a positive association with elements of the Councillors' role such as community projects benefiting from the General Municipal Allocation funding. This goes a long way to mitigating against the lack of experience of a well fought election campaign. That 85% of incumbent candidates were successful, taking 72% of available council seats speaks for itself. The benefits of running as a sitting councillor substantially outweighs any and all negative concerns.

### **Co-opted councillors success rate**

One question we had for our 2024 election data was whether the electorate distinguished between incumbent candidates who gained their seat by being successful candidates in 2019 and incumbent candidates co-opted into their seat between the 2019 and 2024 elections.

Not all the 144 co-opted councillors ran in the 2024 local elections. 18 of them resigned before the end of their term (8 men and 10 women) resulting in double co-options to the same seat. A further 9 completed their term, but decided not to run in the 2024 local elections (3 men and 6 women). The remaining **117** ran in the 2024 local elections (57 women and 60 men).

68% (**79**) of the 117 co-opted councillors were successful in winning a seat (38 women and 41 men), with 32% (**38**) failing to get elected (19 men and 19 women). By gender, 67% of the co-opted female councillors who ran were elected (38 elected out of a total of 57 women) and 68% of co-opted male councillors who ran (41 elected out of a total of 60 men). These statistics are somewhat skewed because of the large number of Green Party co-opted incumbents who filled seats after the 2020 general and Seanad elections but did not retain them in the 2024 local election.

### **2019 incumbent councillor success rate**

To compare co-opted incumbents with those elected into place for at least one term, we need to separate out the co-opted incumbents from the total incumbent number. This gives us **689** councillors elected in 2019 running again in 2024 (149 women and 540 men). **605** of them were elected, a success rate of 88%. Disaggregating by gender, tells us that of these **689** candidates, **149** of them were women, and **128** (86%) of those incumbent women were elected. This is comparable to the 88% of male incumbent candidates elected (**477** successful male incumbents elected from **540** male incumbent candidates). Again, on the evidence provided by the 2024 election data, the electoral advantage enjoyed by incumbents is irrespective of the gender of that incumbent.

### **New candidate success rate**

To complete our comparative analysis, we looked at how the candidates without any incumbency status at 2024 fared. Tracking those who were unsuccessful in 2019 having previously been elected form part of ongoing research, and are not taken into account here. For the purposes of this paper, all candidates not elected in 2019 and not co-opted in the interim are termed new candidates. There were **1366** of these (475 women and 891 men). **265** (19%) of them were successful (80 women and 185 men). By gender, 17% of the women who ran as new candidates were successful (80 women elected from 475 new female candidates) and 21% of the men (185 men elected from 891 male candidates).

Co-opted incumbents had lower electoral success than their colleagues winning their second election. But their electoral success compared to new candidates is remarkable. They did substantially better than new candidates **without any** incumbent status. The election results demonstrate that whether a candidate had been elected in 2019 or co-opted into a seat between elections, they enjoyed considerable advantage

to those running as a new candidate. Moreover, male and female incumbent and co-opted councillors were re-elected in equal percentage amounts.

### **SHE Observations and Recommendations**

A breakdown of the gender of the 2024 local election candidates by party shows that all but two of the larger parties (based on Dáil representation) ran more than 40% women on tickets. The exceptions were Fianna Fáil (24%) and Fine Gael (29%). This stands in contrast to Sinn Féin's 45%, the Green Party's 50%, the Social Democrats 51% and Labour's 41% female candidacy. With over half of the elected councillors between them, it is disappointing that these two significant parties in Irish politics were unable to do better. However, a chance for redemption beckons. Co-options following the general and seanad elections will create vacancies in many councils. This is a golden opportunity for all parties with council vacancies to increase the number of female councillors by having equity in political representation as the guiding principle when going through the co-option process. This will not only create an immediate increase in female representation in local government, but will also ensure women co-opted into vacant seats will have their 2029 local election chances significantly boosted. On the 2024 data, voters make little distinction between Councillors they voted for in prior elections and co-opted councillors they are seeing on their ballot papers for the first time. Neither does the gender of the co-opted councillor seem pertinent.

Should Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have successful general and seanad elections they can openly demonstrate that they mean what they say when it comes to women in local politics. They can compensate for their comparatively low number of female candidates through the co-option process. This is especially a pertinent matter for the Fine Gael Party given the number of TDs that have publicly stated that they will not seek re-election.

With a general election imminent, the potential for parties to make a conscious effort to support women into local politics is real and immediate. Political parties talk a good talk about the importance of supporting women into council chambers, and a diversity of women at that. But they are not all walking the walk. If women, and women from differing backgrounds are not present in the grassroots membership, then party leaders need to ask why and have a recruitment plan implemented that is not mere lip-service. Leadership is required to demonstrate to the entire party membership, branch by branch, that this party means what it says about equity in political representation.

Politics is a long game, and so is candidate development. But there is time. We can state to within a few weeks when the next local elections will be. They will be in late May or early June 2029. We did not see an increase in female councillors in 2024. There is no excuse for more of the same in five years time.