

Changes may offer parties a quick fix to gender quotas

By Dr Adrian Kavanagh

Friday, June 22, 2012

With constituencies in general growing larger, parties will find it easier to implement gender quotas. But some areas will see unprecedented competition, writes Adrian Kavanagh

THE range of changes in the Constituency Commission report are probably the most dramatic to be seen since 1980, when the number of Dáil seats increased from 148 to 166.

The number of constituencies has been reduced by three (from 43 to 40), with four fewer three-seat constituencies and one more four-seat constituency increasing the average number of seats per Dáil constituency to 3.95, a higher level than that associated with the 2004 and 2007 reports.

Indeed, the number of four-seat constituencies (16) is the largest in the history of the State.

Given that female candidates tend to do better in larger constituencies, the slight increase in constituency size may make it easier for parties to implement gender quotas, although the reduction in total seat numbers means fewer openings for new female candidates to make a breakthrough.

The most dramatic change in Cork relates to the loss of a seat in Cork South Central, with the constituency also losing territory in the south-western part of Cork City to Cork North Central and the Lee being once again breached in terms of this, acting as a political boundary.

While Fianna Fáil Micheál Martin will lose a significant number of votes due to this change, the areas being lost would have been very much part of Jerry Buttimer's base within the constituency and he loses roughly one-fifth of his total votes as a result.

The temptation to follow his base and move to Cork North Central may be tempered somewhat by the fact there is a city-based Fine Gael TD (Dara Murphy) already in that constituency and that he would be leaving behind roughly 5,000 first-preference votes he won in the rest of Cork South Central in the general election last year.

While Cork North Central gains this territory and retains its four seats, the constituency has had to return the rural territory it gained from Cork North-West in the 2007 revisions, a factor that will impact on the votes of candidates who tended to do better in the county area of this constituency at last year's election, including Billy Kelleher and Pat Burton.

The creation of five-seat county constituencies for Tipperary, Donegal, and Kerry are the most dramatic changes, with territory in north Tipperary and south Donegal also moving into neighbouring constituencies.

There is one fewer seat to fight over in Kerry. Looking at support levels for the different parties and groupings in the Feb 2011 election (and excluding the part of west Limerick that

was joined with Kerry North at the last election), Fine Gael would have won over 28,000 votes (roughly 35%) in the Kerry county area, with Labour winning over 13,000 votes (about 16.5%), Fianna Fáil just under 10,000 (about 12%), Sinn Féin just less than 8,000 (about 9.5%), the Greens just over 600 (less than 1%), and independent candidates winning about 21,500 votes (26.5%).

The Sinn Féin vote is artificially low because the party did not contest Kerry South in 2011. On the basis of the party vote there in 2007 and a strong showing by Toireasa Ferris in this area in the 2009 European elections, the total Sinn Féin general election 2011 vote in Kerry would probably have been 11% or 12% had the party contested Kerry South.

These figures would suggest two seats for Fine Gael, one for Labour and at least one independent seat, with the remaining seat being fought over between Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, and other independents.

However, if support trends in recent national opinion polls are replicated at the next general election, Sinn Féin would be expected to win a seat here, with Labour's seat looking highly vulnerable although the party will be helped by the fact that the percentage of the vote needed to reach the quota will now be much smaller.

Unlike party candidates, who can expect to tap into a party vote across the county (a factor that may in turn help Fianna Fáil regain at least one seat), the larger constituency will pose a major challenge for the mainly south Kerry-based independents.

Each Constituency Commission report produces a number of "group of death" and "group of life" constituencies and this report has similarly produced a number of winners and losers. On the one hand, the report allows for the political re-unification of Leitrim and Swords (the focus of roughly three quarters of all public submissions to the commission) and effectively awards an extra seat to Laois and Offaly, with openings for new candidates to make a breakthrough in these constituencies as well as the enlarged Dublin Fingal.

On the other hand, the reduction in total seat numbers has brought about seat losses for a number of areas, including Galway and Mayo in addition to the counties mentioned earlier, but also for some constituencies in Dublin, which in turn will make it difficult for a number of TDs to retain their seats.

The old five-seat Dublin South constituency has lost two seats to become a three-seat Dublin Rathdown constituency, losing territory to Dublin South West and Dún Laoghaire.

With three Fine Gael TDs representing this constituency, in addition to the high-profile independent Shane Ross and Labour's Alex White, and with Fianna Fáil as well as Green Party leader Eamon Ryan looking to regain their seats, this could well be the new group of death constituency.

Elsewhere in Dublin, the Terenure area has been moved from Dublin South Central into Dublin South East (with this renamed as Dublin Bay South) with Dublin South Central losing a seat, while the old three-seat Dublin North Central and Dublin North East constituencies have been effectively amalgamated into a new five-seat Dublin Bay North constituency, again meaning one sitting TD must lose a seat here.

Changes involving Dublin Central, with the Drumcondra area moving into Dublin North West and Ashtown area into Dublin West, probably effectively mark the final nail in the coffin of the "Drumcondra mafia" in this constituency, but also makes things difficult for Fine Gael's Paschal Donohoe and Fianna Fáil's Mary Fitzpatrick in what is becoming a decidedly more working-class constituency.

Indeed, with her Navan Rd base now in Dublin West, Mary Fitzpatrick may need to decide whether she must change constituency — a factor that could then present an opening for a new Fianna Fáil candidate to emerge at the next local elections.

* Dr Adrian Kavanagh is a lecturer in NUI Maynooth who specialises in electoral geography