

Sweden's Feminist Initiative are on the rise, but what does the history of women's parties tell us about their prospects?

By Democratic Audit UK

*With the success of Soraya Post and Feminist Initiative in Sweden this year, **Claire McGing** looks at women's political parties, how they emerge, what influences they can have, and the challenges they face. While the influence of women's parties has historically frequently been transitory, they nonetheless have a 'contagion' effect on mainstream parties, who seek to protect their status by feminising their organisations.*



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Despite endorsements from Pharrell Williams and Abba's Benny Anderson, and optimistic opinion and exit poll results, the Feminist Initiative (FI) failed to garner the 4% support it needed to win representation in the Swedish Parliament last weekend. Still, the FI shouldn't be too disappointed with its 2.5% showing – its vote has almost quadrupled since the 2006 general elections (0.68%) and the party now qualifies for tax-funded financing. The FI also holds 27 seats in Swedish municipalities and, in May, saw Soraya Post elected to the Europe Parliament after winning 5.3% of the national vote. This made Post the first ever 'feminist party' MEP and the first Romani woman in Swedish history to be selected as a political party candidate. She wasn't the only feminist seeking a seat in Europe – in France, a number of specifically feminist candidates ran on the 'Féministes pour une Europe Solidaire' list ('Feminists for a United Europe').

Co-founded as a pressure group in 2005 by former Swedish Left Party leader, Gudran Schyman, the FI quickly gained a strong membership base, particularly among young women, and decided to organise as a political party in 2006. Their slogan for the 2014 general election – 'Out with the racists – in with the feminists!' – sought to widen their appeal, linking patriarchy to all fields of society. The [FI policy platform](#) is, thus, broad and deals with issues as diverse as the economy to welfare to climate change.

The FI's growth has led to [conversations in the UK](#) and elsewhere about the need for women in other countries to

establish feminist parties to work towards a 'critical mass' of females in parliament, to bring gender issues to the forefront of public policy, and to tackle the underlying male culture of institutionalised politics.

Global research to date on women's parties is scant but a [surprising number have emerged over the past century](#). This includes numerous states in post-communist Europe, Argentina, Greece, Spain, Iceland, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, Cambodia, the United States, Uruguay, South Africa, Hungary, Japan, India and Israel, amongst others. Over 50 countries have had a women's party to various degrees of success and some, such as Ukraine and South Africa, have had numerous. Given its abysmal record on women's representation it is surprising that none was ever set up in the Republic of Ireland, though second wave feminists in the 1970s did, apparently, discuss the possibility.

It is important to note that not all women's parties are ideologically feminist – the Hellenic Women's Political Party of Greece and the All Ukrainian Party of Women's Initiatives, for example, both emphasised traditional gender roles and argued that women brought different perspectives to parliament as mothers and home-makers. Many also allow male members to join.

How and why do women's parties emerge, and what influence have they had on politics? There are a number of key points to consider here.

First, like other small parties, proportional representation and the presence of a multi-party system are more advantageous than plurality rules (though Women of Russia did win two seats in single-member constituencies in the 1993 Russian general election).

Second, women's parties often emerge during definitive – or even crisis – points in a state's history. Women in many of the new democracies of post-communist Europe formed coalitions to ensure their voices would be heard in an era without strong social guarantees.

Women's parties have been particularly common in sectarian conflict areas, including Northern Ireland and Israel. In a male-dominated society like Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition (NIWC) formed in 1995 to give women a voice in the peace talks that would lead to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and to the establishment of the devolved Legislative Assembly. Focusing on human rights and inclusivity, the NIWC did not seek to argue for a particular ethnic community and, to this end, ran women candidates from all backgrounds. The NIWC representatives were often dismissed and [subject to sexism during deliberations](#), particularly from the mostly-male Unionist side (one even 'moaned' at them), but their significant contribution to the peace process is clear. They continuously advocated for victims' rights, and got a formal commitment to women's political equality inserted into the GFA. And, while their argument for a mixed-member voting system was unsuccessful, the NIWC managed to ensure that the new STV constituencies would each elect six Assembly representatives. This reduced the threshold required for representation, advantaging smaller parties like themselves.

Finally, even when they do experience electoral success, history suggests that women's parties rarely last into the long-term. Once mainstream parties see them as a threat, they respond by making changes to their personnel and policy platform. In political science this is called the 'contagion effect', and many green parties have had a similar experience. The former Icelandic Women's List ('Kvenna Listin'), for instance, lost their raison d'être once the largest parties began to include more women candidates on their lists. Today, [39.7% of Iceland's parliament is female](#), placing it joint-11th in the world with Spain. Similarly, after the NIWC won two Assembly seats in the 1998 election, the nationalist parties (SDLP and Sinn Féin) feared the loss of votes and transfers in key constituencies and attempted to 'feminise' their organisations. The hardening of nationalist voting on either side (the women had registered as 'others' in the Assembly, as opposed to 'unionist' or 'nationalist') further pushed the NIWC out of the electoral landscape and they lost both of their seats in 2003. The party disbanded in 2006 but, like many women's parties in history, their role in encouraging other parties (even if modestly) to give more consideration to women voters and their women members is noteworthy.

How will Swedish parties respond to the FI? Watch this space.

Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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