

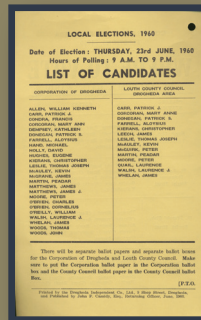
# THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (Ireland) ACT, 1898 AND THE FRANCHISE

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT BEFORE 1898

Prior to 1898, Irish local government consisted of a number of bodies, most of which were unrepresentative. The local authority at county level, responsible for roads, bridges, courthouses and other public buildings was the Grand Jury. Made up of landowners, it was appointed by the sheriff, and met twice yearly to approve works. By the nineteenth century there was limited franchise to elect members.

The Boards of Guardians of the Poor Law Unions managed the workhouse system, and were later made responsible for labourers' housing and sanitation in rural areas. Ratepayers elected them, and could have more than one vote, depending on the amount of property held.

Property owners and occupiers with property valued at £10 elected borough corporations, while the qualification for electors in other towns was either £4 or £5.



## ELECTORAL OFFENCES

It is an offence to—  
(1) infringe the secrecy of the ballot;  
(2) apply for a ballot paper in the name of another person;

## A NEW SYSTEM

The undemocratic nature of the system, in the era of Home Rule agitation, prompted the Conservative government to draft the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898. This act dramatically reformed local government by creating new local authority bodies:

County Councils; which assumed responsibility for works projects from the Grand Jury;

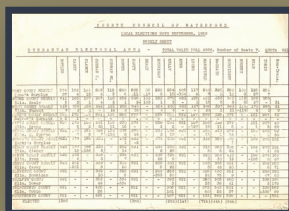
Urban District Councils; were the housing authorities in urban areas. They and the Rural District Councils also acted as sanitary authorities, with responsibility for the control of 'nuisances', the provision of public wells, the installation of drains and other matters of public health.

Rural District Councils; recommended projects from their areas to the county councils, and the work was funded by a rate levied on all occupiers of property. The Rural District Councils assumed responsibility for labourers' houses from the poor-law guardians, and rural district councillors themselves became ex officio guardians.

County Borough Councils were also reformed.

## THE FRANCHISE

The right to vote in local elections was extended to voters in parliamentary elections: all occupiers of property with a valuation of £10 or more, which included the heads of small farm and labouring households. Women who met the criteria could also vote, which was a breakthrough. However, servants, boarders, and adult men living with their parents were excluded. Another important advance for women was the fact that they could be elected to Rural District Councils and Boards of Guardians.



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# THE FIRST LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS, 1899

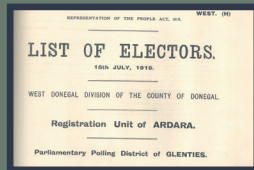
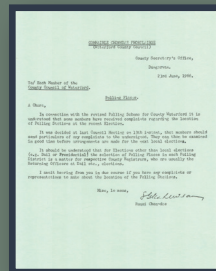
## PUBLIC REACTION

Ireland's first local government elections were held on 6 April 1899 with polling from 8am-8pm in urban areas and 10am-8pm in rural areas.

The elections were widely reported on in national and local newspapers, which are full of local details and anecdotes despite protestations that 'there was no feature of interest in the proceedings.' In Waterford, there was a disturbance at the Courthouse when two electors came to blows during an argument about the relative merits of two candidates for County Councillorship, Messrs Kearney and Keily. Fierce competition in some contests is evidenced by the fact that cases of personation were reported.

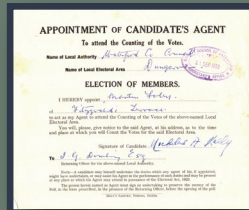
## VOTER TURNOUT

The weather was very poor on polling day and doubtless affected voter turnout. More interest in County than Urban and Rural District elections was noted. However, it was reported in the Carrick-on-Suir division of South Tipperary that more than 75% of electors in both County and District elections had voted.



## NEW ELECTORS

Two classes of electors were especially commented on in coverage. These were women and illiterate persons. Women featured heavily nationwide and it was commented that they enjoyed the novelty of the franchise. In the Blarney division for the Cork County Council elections it was reported that by 4pm, 36 out of a possible 47 women had voted.



At a polling station in the Kilcullen Division for Cork County Council elections, it was noted that of the first 79 electors, only nine could read and write. In common with other areas, this had the consequence of creating delays on polling day.

## CELEBRATING THE OUTCOME

Despite the lack of emotion noted by newspapers, there are many instances recorded of celebrations on the evening of polling day or the following day when results began to be announced. In Tralee, the Boherbee and Strand Street Fife and Drum band paraded the streets headed by torchlight procession. The band was followed by an immense crowd cheering for James Bailey, the nationalist candidate, and booing his unionist opponent, Robert McCowen.

One newspaper reported on bonfires burning on the hills around Dungarvan, and declared that they marked a people rejoicing because for the first time in the country's chequered history, the voice of the people was allowed to assert itself as representatives of the Crown colony were replaced by representatives chosen by the people.

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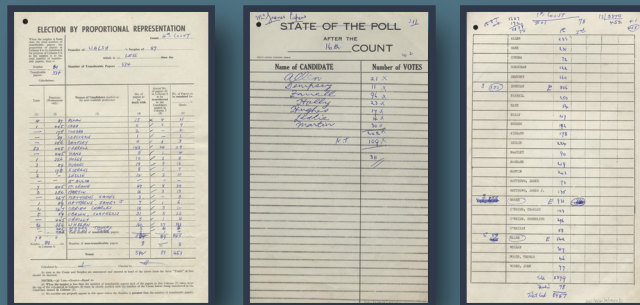
# RESULTS OF THE FIRST ELECTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

## NATIONALISTS TAKE A STAGGERING 75% OF THE NEW COUNTY COUNCIL SEATS

The 6th April 1899 was a historic moment in the evolution of democratic local government in Ireland. It was also an extremely busy electoral day with over 4,000 district elections taking place throughout the country. Despite this, the Local Government Board reported “there was no hitch of any kind”.

The outcome was extraordinary, resulting in an almost total shift in power, with Nationalists taking 774 seats and Unionists taking 265 (the majority in Ulster). Before 1899, Unionists had held 704 grand jury places with only 47 occupied by Nationalists. A contemporary newspaper article reported ‘...the results were everywhere received with good humour and satisfaction. The successful candidates did not boast their victory nor did the defeated see any reason for undue depressions or disappointment’.

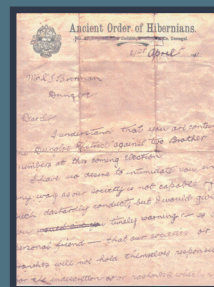
One of the primary purposes of the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898 was to put county government on a representative basis, and this it did. Many councils became predominantly Nationalist, and thus the “great revolution in Irish local government was accomplished remarkably swiftly and smoothly”.



The main effect of the Act was the transfer of power from the Unionist landlord to the Nationalist bourgeoisie. New and different people were brought into local politics. Landlords virtually disappeared from local bodies, to be replaced by farmers and shopkeepers. In Galway, the 35-member council included a landlord, a Catholic Unionist barrister and writer, three solicitors, a college professor and medical doctor, three merchants, an auctioneer, and seventeen or eighteen tenant farmers.

Most councils held their inaugural meetings around the 22nd April. Their first acts included the election of a Chairman and a declaration re-affirming their commitment to Home Rule. Thereafter they got straight down to local business. Between 1899 and 1905, reports of the Local Government Board, which continued to supervise local administration, expressed satisfaction with the conduct of the new councils.

It is a testament to the hard work done by these earliest county, urban and borough councils that, during the first decade of their existence, they were responsible for an increase in the provision of labourers' cottages from 16,000 in 1900 to 60,000 in 1908.



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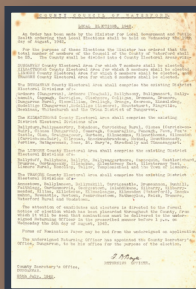
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# FAMOUS ELECTIONS

## FAMOUS ELECTIONS

The resounding victory of Sinn Féin in the general elections of 1918 was repeated in the 1920 local elections with the party gaining control of 25 out of 33 county councils and 172 of 206 rural district councils.

In 1917 Sinn Féin was re-constituted as a republican party, whose aim was the establishment of an independent all-Ireland republic as declared in the Proclamation of Independence in 1916. Sinn Féin attracted the support of those who had fought in the Easter Rising, and in the 1918 Westminster Election, the party won an overwhelming 73 out of 105 seats, establishing Dáil Éireann and the unilaterally declared Irish Republic. In local elections held in urban areas under a system of proportional representation, the polls confirmed Sinn Féin dominance in 172 out of 206 boroughs and urban districts.



## CLEAN UP LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Great importance was attached to the local elections of 1920 since no general election was planned after 1918. It was mainly seen as a possibility to defy English political control. Acting as a united political front, Sinn Féin emphasised the local sphere and took on the mission to 'clean up local government'. Their manifesto stressed on efficiency and honest administration. Prior to the Cumann na nGaedheal administration local authorities had significant power in making appointments which led to visible corruption cases.

This first government of the new Free State viewed local government as an area open to reforms and opportunity to assert its authority. The government's decisions had a profound impact on the practices of local authorities although the 1920s were dominated by an obsession with administration and personnel rather than providing a wider range of services.

## CHANGES

The first Dáil's Democratic Programme gave assurances to end the 'degrading, odious and foreign' poor law system, and to look after the weakest. However what followed largely indicated that welfare issues were not a priority, either locally and nationally.

Not only did they put an end to the Board of Guardians but the rural district councils were also abolished, regarded as an unnecessary expense. Firm control was exerted on the local authorities by the establishment of a Local Appointments Commission which would guarantee that positions were filled on the basis of competitive examination.

The 1920 local elections were a clear opportunity to exercise more centralisation, to clear up the negligence associated with the past.

However, a restlessness grew among the general public in the 1920s and 1930s, shared by Fianna Fáil, which was caused by the belief that local government was in essence ineffective and too expensive.

## FIANNA FÁIL AND THE BUILD-UP OF LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

In January 1933 the general election resulted in a Fianna Fáil government, mirrored in the 1934 local elections. The Fianna Fáil organisation was at first very much based on local support. However, from 1934 on the party sought to diminish the power of local government in Ireland.

They regarded the "existing system of local administration as defective and unsatisfactory...an expensive anachronism". The general idea was that the local elected councils were relics of British administration, and that local issues should be classified as national matters.

## CENTRALISATION VS LOCAL CONTROL

A less severe solution took the form of the County Management Act, introduced in 1940 which imposed a management system for county councils. It was a way to centralise control in the hands of a manager while downgrading the position of local authorities, which provoked unease amongst councillors who were anxious to retain their power intact. In 1943 the County and City Managers Association was formed.

In 1942 after Fianna Fáil had been pressurised into holding elections, the question of the relevance of local authorities was still significant and the lack of clear direction for political parties favoured independent candidates: 24.1% which translated into 172 seats, the second largest group after Fianna Fáil, with 30.4% and 215 seats.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the lack of interest towards local elections was illustrated by poor turn outs along with a rising distrust of elected members.

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# THE PUBLIC USE THEIR VOTE TO HAVE THEIR SAY

## GETTING A VOICE

The right to vote provided to ratepayers in the Local Government Act, 1898 gave many people a voice in local politics for the first time. The first local elections introduced new local representatives who were not landlords but local farmers and businessmen who shared the concerns of the neighbours who voted for them.

## VOICING SUPPORT FOR THE NATION

National trends have often been reflected in the results of local elections, particularly, in the 1920 elections, which resulted in a wholesale change in personnel in many local authorities. Local Councils throughout the country recognised the authority of Dáil Éireann over that of the Local Government Board.

## VOICING PROTEST

Protests against the level of rates levied on the population have featured in numerous local elections over the years, and led in 1977 to the abolition of domestic rates. Waste management and bin charges have also been the focus of public campaigns. In 1983 "Leixlip and Kildare Residents Against Local Charges" was formed to protest against proposed local service charges.

## RAISING LOCAL CONCERNS

Local elections also provided people with the opportunity to address local issues. In the 1920 local elections, the Ratepayers' Association topped the poll for Sligo Corporation. Campaigns have been run with regard to the quality of drinking water, provision of housing, water supplies and sewerage systems and the provision of roads. In addition to local government services, other local services also feature in local election campaigns. The demand for cancer services in the Waterford region was a strong feature of the 2004 local campaign.

Independent candidates often begin their political careers as campaigners for schools, against bin charges or on other local issues. Independent candidates "tend to do better at local elections than at national elections" and in 1999 there were 81 non-party candidates elected to 883 seats in County and City Councils.

It is often difficult for people to see just what affect their vote or campaigning can have on their community. The average voter turnout has been dropping in recent years.

## AVERAGE VOTER TURNOUT 1967-1999 (DoELG 2001)

1967	1974	1979	1985	1991	1994	1999
67%	62%	64%	60%	56%	59%	51%

Local archives services provide the public with an opportunity to assess the policies and practices of local authorities, and the impact that local councillors and campaigns can have on these.

