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 $\pounds10$ elected borough corporations, while the qualification for electors in other towns was either $\pounds4$ or $\pounds5$.



ELECTORAL OFFENCES

A NEW SYSTEM

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ELECTORS LISTS, 1923.

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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.

ounty 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. <section-header><text><text><text><text><text><text><text><text><text><text>

LIST OF ELECTORS.

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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.



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".

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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.

Anime Drefer of Hibernins

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.



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 Eireann 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 uncessary 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, mirrorred 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.



ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

HOW CAMPAIGNS WERE RUN

Nineteenth and early twentith century political campaigning largely through public meetings, reports in local papers and hustings^{*}, but it was the candidates themselves who were mo dependent on their own efforts to secure votes.

programmes, highlighting the main local issues coupled with do to door canvassing. The size of the campaign depended large on financial resources, which at that time, were very limited, was not until the 1980's, when resources increased significant that campaigns became more organised and professional, sor requiring campaign managers and teams who were responsil for fundraising and recruitine volunteers.

USE OF MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA

Until recently, the printed press was the main means through which candidates reached the electorate Churches also played an important role in politics during the 19th and 20th centuries because of the influence they held with their congregation. They were instrumental in supporting and challenging political proposals particularly in health and education. But the association of the church with politics has diminished over the years, and the church is not as influential in modern politics.

In contrast, mass media had grown significantly during the 20th century and plays a major role in campaigning today. Candidates regularly use television, newspapers, radio and the internet as a powerful means of persuasion during elections. This development has revolutionized the way in which politicians can broadcast their 'message' to the voting public.





Corporation of Drogheda LOCAL ELECTORAL AREA OF THE BOROGEGH OF DROGHEDA

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MEDIA COVERAGE

The media's role in informing the public during election campaigns is very significant, as they provide the information necessary to help voters make decisions about candidates and their parties. However the laws governing political reporting by the media determine the impact on the content of information broadcast or circulated to the electorate.

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SUPPORT FOR CANDIDATES

National parties often support their local candidates by providingpostersandliterature to assist in their campaigns. Financial support is gained through fundraising events and donations, and volunteers are recruited to assist with door to door canvassing and other duties.

* The platform from which candidates addressed the electors.



LEGISLATIVE CHANGES & ELECTION YEARS

THE ACTS

The Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898 began the process of democratizing local government in Ireland. Under this Act, all householders were entitled to vote, including women for the first time. However, women were not eligible for election to local councils. Under the terms of the Local Authorities Act 1911, women were admitted to council membership.

In 1935, the Local Government (Extension of Franchise) Act abolished the link between property ownership and voting rights, and voting was opened to all citizens over the age of 21.

Perhaps the greatest legislative change subsequent to the 1898 Act itself, was the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1919, which introduced the system of ProportionalRepresentation nation-wide. It also introduced multi-member electoral areas, as opposed to the former system of election by simple majority.

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There were many other legislative changes to follow, such as the increase in the term of office from 3to5years, under the terms of the Local Elections Act 1953; the transfer of responsibility for the registration of electors to the county councils under the Electoral Act 1963; and the clarification of the rules governing nomination, and the introduction of provisions for petitioning the validity of elections, under the Local Elections (Petitions & Disqualifications) Act 1974. This Act also clearly delineated fourteen categories of persons disqualified from standing for local election, including members of the clergy and serving local authority staff. The Local Government Act 1994 abolished the petition and disqualification provisions of the 1974 Act.

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CORPORATION OF DROGHEDA ELECTIONS, 1960 WHERE TO VOTE

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Mailthews-Menly Read Street (Wesi); Hand Street (Essi); Bredin Street (Nerch); Bredin Street (SeuD); Stowy Law (Norch); Stomy Law (SouD); Newswastakaka; Coreshilt (Norch Straud); Creenhilts (Churl Hand) (Norch Straud); Cheenhilts (Churl Hand)

THE ELECTIONS

Since 1899, local elections have been held on 21 occasions, in each of the following years:

1902; 1905; 1908; 1911; 1914; 1920; 1925; 1928; 1934; 1942; 1945; 1950; 1955; 1960; 1967; 1974; 1979; 1985; 1991; 1999; 2004.

Elections, which were scheduled to occur, were postponed in 1923, 1931, 1937, 1940, and 1984.

The 1991 elections were for city and county councils only, the 1994 elections were for borough and town councils only.

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MODUS OPERANDI

LOCAL ELECTORAL AREAS (LEAs)

A LEA is a constituency for the purposes of a local authority election, and every county and city is divided into a number of LEA's. Only the towns of Drogheda, Sligo, Bray and Dundalk are divided into LEA's. At local elections, the residents of a town exercise two votes – one for the election of the town/borough council and the other for the county council.

NOMINATIONS AND DISQUALIFICATIONS

Candidates may nominate themselves, or be nominated by a proposer, who must be an elector in the relevant local authority area. Representatives of registered political parties must include a certificate of political affiliation. If no certificate is attached, the form must be assented to by 15 persons (excluding the candidate and any proposer) registered in the relevant LEA. Other candidates may be described as "Non-Party", or may leave the appropriate space blank. This information informs the make-up of the final ballot papers.

Disqualifications preventing candidature are described in Sections 12 & 13 of the Local Government Act 2001.

VOTERS AND VOTING

Generally, every person over 18 years of age may be registered as a local government elector for the LEA where the person ordinarily resides. Citizenship is no longer a requirement for voting at a local election. Each council compiles a register of electors annually for its administrative area.

The 1920 local elections were the first for 6 years, and the first held under the system of proportional representation. Electors now vote by secret ballot using the single transferable vote. This system is based on the principle of an electoral quota, which is calculated by dividing the total number of valid ballot papers by one more than the number of seats to be filled, and adding one to the result. Candidates reaching the quota are deemed elected, although some candidates may be elected without doing so.

The responsibility for conducting the election rests with the local authority returning officer. A polling day, which is the same in all areas and must cover a 12-hour period, is fixed by Ministerial Order.

COUNTING

All ballot boxes are taken to a central counting place for each local authority. Candidates' agents may oversee the counting process. Before counting begins, envelopes containing postal and special voters' ballot papers are opened in the presence of the candidates' agents, and are associated with the other ballot papers for the local authority. Each ballot box is opened and the number of ballot papers checked against a return furnished by each presiding officer. They are then sorted according to the first preferences recorded for each candidate, invalid papers being rejected.







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.

AVERAGE VOTER TURNOUT 1967-1999 (DoELG 2001)

1967	1974	1979	1985	1991	1994	1999





























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