

18.360

To whom it concerns,

In the interests of fair representative democracy, I would recommend against reducing the size of local electoral boundaries.

The smaller the number of people elected in a constituency, the less likely the election result will reflect the actual vote (Moran,2017).

Reducing the size of local electoral constituencies will have a disproportionate and negative impact on smaller political parties and female candidates in local elections.

Political science and past data indicates that reducing the size of constituencies will cut the number of green and left councillors by 75%. The number of female councillors will be cut by 25% (Moran, 2017).

Local government political representation should reflect the demographics of the local area. Currently many groups are seriously under-represented in local politics, cohorts such as young people, women, Travellers and those from migrant communities for example. Reducing the size of constituencies would only serve to compound this already existing problem.

I have attached below an opinion piece originally published in *The Journal* regarding local electoral boundary changes.

Yours Sincerely,
Cllr Barry Martin
Fingal County Council

Moran, O (2017), 'Opinion: Cutting constituency sizes will cut left wing councillors by 75% and women by 25%', *The Journal*, 7 Nov. Available at <http://www.thejournal.ie/readme/opinion-cutting-constituency-sizes-will-cut-left-wing-councillors-by-75-and-women-by-25-3682448-Nov2017/> [19 Feb 2018]

Opinion: Cutting constituency sizes will cut left wing councillors by 75% and women by 25%

It's well-known that the smaller the number of people elected in a constituency, the less likely the election result will reflect the actual vote, writes Oliver Moran.

Nov 7th 2017, 7:00 AM

Oliver Moran

WHEN A SENIOR government minister approaches you to ask how badly you will be affected by government policy, you know it's time to listen up. That's the level of threat being faced by environmentalists, socialists and women from the government's planned move to cut constituency sizes again for local government.

All the political science and past data indicates this will cut the number of green and left councillors by 75%. The number of female councillors will be cut by 25%. Afterwards, we can expect the number of areas with at least one female representative to be cut from over 80% at present to down below 60% again in future.

The issue is at a crunch point now because the terms of reference for the boundary committee that will cut constituency sizes is being drafted. We have only a short time to make sure Minister Eoghan Murphy doesn't make as big a mess as his predecessor, Phil Hogan, did in the last government.

Town councils

The motivation for the cuts is down to an austerity measure pushed through under Phil Hogan. That was to eliminate town council and replace them with "municipal districts", supposedly based around rural towns and their hinterland.

Sounds good. The problem is that this was done on the cheap, with municipal districts doubling up as local electoral areas for county councils. Now many councillors are rightfully complaining that some municipal districts are too geographically dispersed to properly replace the town councils that Hogan abolished.

But the change did have one very positive effect on representation on local government. With the establishment of municipal districts, the number of seats in local electoral areas increased from between three and seven to between six and ten by merging older electoral areas.

The result had a positive effect on representation that is now threatened with being undone.

Female representation

It's well-known that the smaller the number of people elected in a constituency, the less likely the election result will reflect the actual vote. The UCC academic, Liam Weeks, says five or six is generally accepted as the minimum number needed. This was the 2013 recommendation of the Constitutional Convention as well. What is less well-known is the effect this has on female representation.

Smaller constituencies have a two-fold effect on women. First, smaller parties, which are more likely to stand female candidates, are less likely to be elected. And secondly, because women from larger parties tend to be elected after their male counterparts, there is less opportunity for women to be elected even when they are nominated by the bigger parties.

In the 2009 local elections, the chances of a woman being elected in a three seat constituency was 8%, rising to 20% in a seven seater. The average was 15% in a five seat constituency.

Lo-and-behold, when the average size of a local election constituency was increased in 2014 from five to seven seats, the proportion of women elected overall also magically increased from 15% to 20%. This effect on women being elected has a double consequence because local electoral areas now double as municipal districts.

In 2014, because of larger constituency sizes, over 80% of municipal districts had at least one female member. Reducing constituency sizes to 2009 levels would mean reducing the probability that at least one female member would be elected. In 2009, 42% of areas had no female representation at all because of this.

Small parties

The effect is even more dramatic for small parties.

For example, in both the 2009 and 2014 local elections, the Greens and Solidarity-PBP (or the Socialist Party and People Before Profit as they were then) received about 5% of the vote. So you would expect them to get about 5% of council seats? But in 2009, they got just 1% of seats.

When the size of constituencies was increased in 2014, so that no constituency was smaller than the recommended six, without any increase to their share of the vote, their share of seats grew to 4%, much closer to what would be considered fair given their vote.

Whether you agree with them or not, these small parties, like others, have contributed substantially to Irish political life. From expanding bus services in Kilkenny, to reviewing the upper income limits for social housing in Dublin, and representing communities at oral hearings into pollution by Irish Cement in Limerick and incineration in Cork.

Effectively eliminating these parties from local government would be a backwards step for Irish democracy.

Don't double down on a mistake

The solution to the problem created by the abolition of town councils doesn't need to be repeated by Eoghan Murphy doubling down on the mistakes of Phil Hogan. Undoing the good of larger and more representative local electoral area would not benefit anyone.

Both Phil Hogan and Brendan Howlin now regret their decision to push ahead with the abolition of town councils as an austerity measure. Fianna Fáil are committed to their restoration too.

This doesn't need to cost money. It can be completely voluntary. Former town councillors were paid €20 per week. They were hardly motivated by the pay. But they provided a local space for politics that many rural municipal districts cannot achieve.

Restoring them, not cutting the number of seats in a constituency – excluding women and small parties from local government – is the answer to what is missing now.

Oliver Moran is the Green Party spokesperson on political reform. He was a founding member of Second Republic, a non-aligned group that campaigned for the establishment of the Constitutional Convention, the predecessor of the Citizens Assembly. He lives in Cork with his wife and young son.