



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

Paper 120/140

12 November 2014

NIAR 759-14

**Michael Potter**

# Job Sharing, Twinning and Zipping: Applications to Northern Ireland

## 1 Introduction

This paper has been prepared in the context of the review by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee into women in politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly<sup>1</sup>.

During the meeting of 4 November 2014, clarification was sought by the Committee on how certain measures to encourage more participation of women in politics might be applied to Northern Ireland. The paper briefly summarises the political system in Northern Ireland, then considers job sharing, twinning and zipping as possible mechanisms for increasing women's participation in politics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Review into 'Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly': <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Committees/Assembly-and-Executive-Review/Reviews/Women-in-Politics-and-the-Northern-Ireland-Assembly/>.

## 2 The Political System of Northern Ireland

The operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly is provided for in Part IV of the Northern Ireland Act 1998<sup>2</sup>. Sections 33 and 34 of the Act provide for the manner of conducting elections to the Assembly.

Section 33 states:

**33 Constituencies and numbers of members.**

(1) The members of the Assembly shall be returned for the parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland.

(2) Each constituency shall return six members.

Section 34 states:

**34 Elections and franchise.**

(1) This section applies to elections of members of the Assembly, including by-elections.

(2) Each vote in the poll at an election shall be a single transferable vote.

(3) A single transferable vote is a vote—

(a) capable of being given so as to indicate the voter's order of preference for the candidates for election as members for the constituency; and

(b) capable of being transferred to the next choice when the vote is not needed to give a prior choice the necessary quota of votes or when a prior choice is eliminated from the list of candidates because of a deficiency in the number of votes given for him.

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly are an excepted matter under Schedule 2 of the Act.

---

<sup>2</sup> Northern Ireland Act 1998: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/contents>.

### 3 Measures to Increase Women's Participation

The section briefly considers the implementation of job sharing, twinning and zipping as potential mechanisms that political parties can use to increase the number of female candidates for election to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002<sup>3</sup> excludes political candidate selection from the provisions of the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976<sup>4</sup>. The 2002 Act exempts political parties from sex discrimination provisions of the 1976 Order under the following conditions (Article 43A(2) of the 1976 Order):

(2) This Article applies to arrangements made by a registered political party which—

(a) regulate the selection of the party's candidates in a relevant election, and

(b) are adopted for the purpose of reducing inequality in the numbers of men and women elected, as candidates of the party, to be members of the body concerned

#### Job Sharing

Job sharing in political representation appears to be untested in the context of legislatures in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Two candidates stood on one mandate for elections to the Scottish Parliament in 1999, but were unsuccessful. A Private Member's Bill was introduced in the House of Commons in 2012 to provide for two candidates to stand for a single mandate, but this fell due to lack of time<sup>5</sup>.

Suggestions for the introduction of job sharing in the Northern Ireland Assembly have been made in the past<sup>6</sup>, but how this would work in practice has not been explored in depth.

Applying job sharing to the Northern Ireland Assembly, following an appropriate amendment to the Northern Ireland Act, would entail two members standing for a single mandate as one of the six members returned per constituency. How the arrangement might work in practice would be a matter primarily for the provisions of the legislative amendment<sup>7</sup>, but also for the nature of the agreement between the two candidates.

<sup>3</sup> Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/2/contents>.

<sup>4</sup> Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1976/1042/contents>.

<sup>5</sup> For arguments for and against job sharing in politics, see Research and Library Service Research Paper 106/14 *Job Sharing in Political Representation* 24 October 2014: [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/10614.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/10614.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Margaret Ward (2000), *The Northern Ireland Assembly and Women: assessing the gender deficit*, Belfast: Democratic Dialogue: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/dd/papers/women-assembly.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of a text for legislation in this respect, see Representation of the People (Members' Job Share) Bill 2012-13: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2012-13/representationofthepeoplemembersjobshare.html>.

## **Twinning**

'Twinning' is the practice of parties selecting candidates in constituencies in tandem, one female and one male. Used across all constituencies a party might contest, the same number of female as male candidates would stand. This mechanism was used by the Labour Party for elections to the National Assembly for Wales in 1998<sup>8</sup>.

'Twinning' is contingent on an appropriate party mechanism, such as centralised candidate selection or agreements between local party offices to 'twin'.

In theory, 'twinning' can be extended to more than two constituencies, where female and male candidates are equalised across clusters of electoral districts. The success of 'twinning' to increase the number of women elected to a legislature is dependent on the female candidate in the 'twinning' arrangement standing in a winnable seat<sup>9</sup>.

Elections using the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system in Northern Ireland could use 'twinning' by arranging candidate selection agreements between constituencies to pair male and female candidates.

## **Zippering**

'Zippering' is the practice of alternating women and men on party lists. They are usually associated with proportional systems. 'Zippering' has been used by Plaid Cymru in elections to the National Assembly for Wales<sup>10</sup>. Wales has an Additional Member System (AMS) with 40 Members elected by first past the post and 20 on a regional proportional party list system. It is this latter element that enables the use of 'zippering'.

'Zippering' ensures that equal numbers of women and men appear as candidates on party lists, but depending on the number of lists from which elected representatives are chosen in a system, it may matter whether a male or a female candidate appears first on a list. For example, if a party can expect one candidate to be elected from each regional or constituency list across an election, there may still be no women elected if men are first on each list.

Northern Ireland does not have a proportional party list system, therefore the traditional use of 'zippering' may not be applicable to Northern Ireland. However, where a party selects more than one candidate for the six-member constituencies of Northern Ireland, a 'zippering' system could in theory be used, although the electorate would be choosing individuals from the candidates selected, rather than parties guaranteeing a gender balance in representation among those elected.

---

<sup>8</sup> 'Welsh Labour Votes for Sex Equality', *BBC News* 17 May 1998: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/politics/95082.stm>.

<sup>9</sup> Pippa Norris and Mona Lena Krook (2011), *Gender Equality in Elected Office: A Six-Step Action Plan*, Vienna: OSCE, p.25.

<sup>10</sup> Electoral Reform Society (2011), *Women's Representation in Scotland and Wales*, London: ERS, p.9.

## Other Methods

There are other mechanisms for increasing the number of female candidates presented to an electorate that might be applicable to Northern Ireland<sup>11</sup>. An example is all-women shortlists, where the list of candidates presented for selection by a party for a particular constituency comprises only women.

In addition, parties could adopt rules regarding the replacement of Members when they leave the Assembly, for example due to resignation or decease. In this case, parties might commit to co-opt only women, for example, or at least ensure female Members are not replaced by males.

Analysis of party candidate selection in Northern Ireland concludes that most of the main parties rely on local selection processes, where candidates are selected by constituency associations with less party elite control. This means that it is more problematic to apply a common candidate selection policy across a political party<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> For a range of mechanisms for increasing the representation of women, see Chapter 4 of Research and Information Service Research Paper 09/14 *Women in the Northern Ireland Assembly*, 3 September 2013: [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly\\_exec\\_review/0914.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/0914.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Neil Matthews (2014) 'Gendered Candidate Selection and the Representation of Women in Northern Ireland', *Parliamentary Affairs* 67, 617–646.