

Ireland

Self-rule

INSTITUTIONAL DEPTH AND POLICY SCOPE

Counties are the primary unit of local governance. At independence in 1921 there were twenty-six counties (C 1937, Art. 28A; Callanan and Keogan 2003; Law No. 12 August/1898). This number grew to twenty-nine county councils and five city councils in the 2000s and with an average population of 135,000 county and city councils did not meet the threshold for regional government (Council of Europe: Ireland 1999; Law No. 37/2001, Schedule 5; Loughlin 2001*b*).

A reform in 2014 abolished the town and borough councils and merged a number of county and city councils (Adshead and Finn 2017; Law No. 1/2014). There are now twenty-six county councils, three city councils (Cork, Dublin, and Galway) plus two city and county councils (Limerick and Waterford) which have the same status and autonomy as county councils. These thirty-one councils meet the population threshold for regional government and they constitute intermediate government because they are subdivided into ninety-five municipal districts (Council of Europe: Ireland 2013; Law No. 573/2014, Art. 22A).¹ Municipal districts also function as or are further subdivided into local electoral areas and elected representatives have a seat in a municipal district and a county council. County councils exercise competences in culture, education, harbors, health, libraries, local roads, public housing, transport, and waste collection (Adshead and Finn 2017; Council of Europe: Ireland 2001, 2013; Law No. 1/2014, Schedule 3, Part 3; Quinn 2017: 205–208).

In 1987, in response to EU structural policy, seven (later, eight) development regions were set up (Holmes and Reese 1995; Laffan 1996). These administrations were central government outposts. In 1994, development regions became regional authorities, which are primarily instruments of the local governments that constitute them and which retain legislative authority (Committee of the Regions 2005; Callanan and Keogan 2003; Rees, Quinn, and Connaughton 2004). Regional authorities coordinate the local provision of public services and monitor implementation of EU structural funding (Law No. 11/1991, Art. 43 and No. 394/1993, Art. 14). They also prepare regional guidelines for spatial planning and some of them have assumed a role in coordinating waste management.^β Members of the regional councils are nominated by local authorities (Law No. 394/1993, Art. 5). Each regional authority has a director and permanent staff, and its budget comes from the local authorities (Law No. 394/1993, Arts. 17 and 31).

In 1999, an additional layer consisting of two regional assemblies—the Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly, and the Southern and Eastern Regional Assembly—was set up to channel feedback from subnational authorities on EU structural funding (Committee of the Regions 2005; Law Nos. 37/2001 and 226/1999). The assemblies are composed of elected representatives nominated by local authorities from each region, and they do not have their own

¹ Three city councils (Cork, Dublin, and Galway) and three county councils (Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown, Fingal, and South Dublin) are not subdivided into municipal districts.

budgets (Law No. 226/1999, Arts. 12 and 31).

A reform replaced the eight regional authorities and two regional assemblies by three new regional assemblies in 2015 (Adshead and Finn 2017; Law No. 573/2014). Regional assemblies are responsible for regional development and the management of EU funds and they may exercise functions on behalf of the participating county and city councils (Law No. 573/2014, Art. 20). The county and city councils appoint representatives for the regional assemblies and the regional assembly appoints a chair who, however, has no specific policy implementation power (Adshead and Finn 2017; Callanan 2016; Law No. 573/2014, Arts. 5 and 16).

FISCAL AUTONOMY

County councils can set the rate of a property tax levied on commercial and residential properties (Council of Europe: Ireland 2013; Law No. 52/2012, Art. 20). Development regions had no tax authority. Regional authorities also had no tax authority but could collect fees for the services they provided (Law No. 394/1993, Art. 17.2.e and No. 226/1999, Art. 17.2.d). The working budget for regional assemblies comes primarily from national and EU grants, while operational costs and non-structural funds operations are financed by local authorities (Law No. 573/2014, Art. 57).

BORROWING AUTONOMY

Counties may borrow “in any manner which it considers suitable for the effective performance of its functions” but “only with the sanction of the appropriate Minister” (Law No. 37/2001, Art. 106). The development regions were dependent on intergovernmental grants from counties, the national government, and the EU. According to the 1993 statutory instrument, regional authorities were allowed to “borrow money on over-draft for current purposes subject to such limit as the minister may from time to time determine” (Law No. 394/1993, Art. 17.2.f). In the 1999 statutory instrument the regional assembly may “with the consent of the minister, borrow money on overdraft or otherwise for such purposes considered necessary for the effective performance of its functions” (Law No. 226/1999, Art. 17.2.e). Regional assemblies can also borrow but only with the consent of the Prime Minister, the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Minister of Finance (Law No. 573/2014, Art. 40). We interpret these rules to mean that borrowing authority for regional authorities, regional assemblies, and county councils remains primarily vested in the ministers from the central government.^β

REPRESENTATION

Development regions had no indirect or direct representation. Regional authorities established in 1994 had a council composed of elected representatives from local authorities (Law No. 394/1993, Art. 5 and No. 226/1999, Art. 5). Each regional authority council appointed its own chair who, however, had no specific policy implementation power (Law No. 394/1993, Art. 12 and No. 226/1999, Art. 12). The council of regional assemblies is appointed by representatives from local authorities and the regional assembly appoints a chair but executive power is held by a director appointed by central government (Adshead and Finn 2017; Callanan 2016; Law No. 573/2014,

Arts. 5, 16, and 51). County councils are directly elected every five years and the county councils appoint a chair (*Cathaoirleach*) and a chief executive (Law No. 1/2014, Schedule 3, Part 3).

Shared Rule

There is no regional power sharing.

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Self-rule in Ireland

			Institutional depth	Policy scope	Fiscal autonomy	Borrowing autonomy	Representation		Self-rule
							Assembly	Executive	
Development regions	I	1987-1993	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Regional authorities	I	1994-2014	1	0	0	0	1	1	3
Regional assemblies	I	2015-2018	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
County, city, and city and county councils	II	2014-2018	2	2	1	0	2	2	9

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