



**Submission to the  
Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government  
on proposals to modernise  
the Electoral Registration Process**

**March 2019**

**1. About SpunOut.ie**

SpunOut.ie is Ireland's multi award-winning youth information website created by young people, for young people. Our goal is to empower young people with the information needed to live active, happy, and healthy lives. We do this by providing easy access to relevant, reliable, supportive and non-judgemental information to assist in informed decision-making; by promoting help-seeking behaviour and signposting young people to existing services and supports; and by facilitating a safe and positive online community where young people can share experiences, perspectives and advice. Last year, our site welcomed more than 1.8 million readers.

This short paper sets out our recommendations to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government on modernisation of the electoral registration process.

## 2. Background

Ireland has a proud history as one of the countries with the longest continuously- operating democratic processes in the world. Since 1922, Irish citizens have been free to vote in relatively fair elections without a single period during which this right was suspended or subverted. Moreover, our PR-STV voting system has consistently ensured both a more equal weight of individual votes and more proportional results in elections than many other states operating under variants of the "First Past the Post" model.

This is a considerable democratic legacy for any country, particularly one so small and with such a legacy of colonialist administration. The need to acknowledge and safeguard this democratic history is very real, however it should not lead to any complacency as to the ongoing suitability of an electoral system that has been in operation, without significant change, for almost a century.

The Ireland of the early- and mid-twentieth century was, in many key ways, a very different place to the one that exists today. In the early days of the state, the vast majority of Irish people could expect to live out the bulk of their lives in the same local area in which they were born. Moving away temporarily to pursue a higher education was rare, and for those who moved abroad emigration was usually a permanent decision. These facts made it a natural and logical choice for electoral authorities to operate on a count-by-county basis. However, the structures that worked well in the past are no longer optimally suited to meeting the democratic needs of a highly mobile population, particularly with young people now likely to move within and between countries for education and employment.

Each year over 50,000 young people in Ireland turn 18. If we are serious about supporting them to engage and participate in the democratic process then we need to make registering to vote easier and simpler. Between 1999 and 2014, NYCI-commissioned research<sup>1</sup> found the rate of non-registration amongst young people had doubled from 14% to 30%. Based on population data from the CSO, it can be estimated that up to 120,000 young people who should have been on the register for the last local elections, were not. Only for the efforts of the USI, Yes Equality, BelongTo, Together4Yes and others, thousands of young people would not have been registered in time to vote in the Marriage Equality and Eighth Amendment referendums. It is untenable that non-governmental organisations have to prop up a creaking registration system which ultimately determines whether a citizen can exercise their fundamental right to vote.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youth.ie/nyci/RedCNYCI-poll-30-young-people-aged-18-25-not-registered-vote>

### 3. A Strong, Independent Electoral Commission

SpunOut.ie notes the Department's statement that it is considering four options regarding the establishment of an Electoral Commission. For the reasons outlined above, we believe the status quo is untenable and that therefore the first option, of doing nothing, should be dismissed out of hand. Regarding option two and three, which would establish an Electoral Commission with a limited or non-statutory remit, SpunOut.ie believes that the case for reform is too clear for the Department to either delay or water down the powers and standing of an effective Electoral Commission.

With studies showing that consistent voting is a pattern of behaviour established early in life<sup>2</sup>, we believe that there is an important time pressure at play in terms of developing a voter registration system which is entirely fit for purpose, and that has the mandate and powers necessary to effectively promote voter engagement. Therefore, SpunOut.ie calls for the swift establishment of the form of Electoral Commission describes in option four: a full statutory body which would inherit all relevant functions of the voter registration process on day one of its operation.

We also believe that there is a self-evident case for the Electoral Commission to be as independent from government as possible. This necessitates both a strong basis for the Commission in primary legislation, with guarantees of jurisdiction over all relevant matters, and a source of funding that comes directly from the central fund of the Exchequer rather than through any intermediary bodies.

It is also essential that the Electoral Commission receives a level of funding that will make it properly resourced from the first year of its operation. At the last local elections in 2014, just over €4.84 million was allocated by Government to local authorities to maintain and revise the electoral register. This is insufficient based on information from other jurisdictions. New Zealand, with a similar number of registered voters to Ireland (both between 3 and 3.5 million) is a particularly useful comparison. The New Zealand Electoral Commission invested the equivalent of €12.5 million, two-and-a-half times what we spent in 2014. Simply put, if we want an accurate, complete and user-friendly voter registration system, we need to provide our Electoral Commission with higher levels of investment than what we currently distribute to the local authorities.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://assets.cambridge.org/97805215/41473/frontmatter/9780521541473\\_frontmatter.pdf](http://assets.cambridge.org/97805215/41473/frontmatter/9780521541473_frontmatter.pdf)

#### 4. An Online Registration System

Barriers to engagement in the democratic process should always be minimised wherever possible. The new Electoral Commission will have a major opportunity to sweep away one such blockage to voter engagement by developing an online voter registration system, that taps into the technological possibilities offered by near-ubiquitous internet access among the young to ensure registering to vote is as straightforward and accessible a process as possible.

Recent referendums have been notable for the imagery of first-time voters queuing to exercise their fundamental democratic rights - queuing for voter registration forms provided by the student's unions and the USI; queuing for verification stamps at their local Garda stations; and queuing at local authority offices to get on the register before the final deadline. While these images may have been heartening for the commitment they demonstrated for the democratic process, the nonetheless both out of time and out of place for a society in which almost every young person will have a smartphone in their pocket. And for all those who did manage to queue and register, how many more were blocked out of the system by the various hurdles and deadlines required to keep our current system of council-managed registers in place?

Much has been made of the potential vulnerabilities of an online voter registration service. Some would have us believe that such a system is, by its nature, insecure and open to manipulation. To accept this argument is to reject the myriad possibilities for improving our system in a response born out of fear. In truth, there is no reason why an adequately-funded Electoral Commission cannot create an online registration system that is both secure and easy-to-use. And we are fooling ourselves if we believe that the existing system of 31 disparate voter registration systems, with varying levels of financial commitment and repeated duplication of work between councils, is somehow more secure than a modern, purpose-built system designed with data security in mind. Furthermore, such a centralised system would allow for instant changes in voter location and status as and when they come into effect, ending the current requirement for individuals moving between electoral areas to have their details updated in two different databases.

It may once have been impossible to think of voter registration as simply a matter of a few moments' work, done from anywhere and at any time. But with modern technology, this is no longer the case. Huge opportunities to bring democratic participation to within the reach of every one of our citizens are currently here. The only challenge is to create and fund an Electoral Commission that can grasp those opportunities.



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