

# **Submission Document**

## **Electoral Commission**

### **Draft Research**

### **Programme 2024-2026**

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# Research Strands

# Strand A: Longitudinal Survey Research and Data Collection

Ireland Votes commends the committed approach An Coimisiún has outlined on the development of a NEDS data collection plan for Ireland. At Ireland Votes, we appreciate the wide-ranging election experts and academics, along with the previous Irish National Election Studies (INES) which contributed vital data on the Irish electorate. But as mentioned in An Coimisiún's proposal, we have lacked a consistent and appropriately sourced study.

We believe that in any rolling study, the data collection of voter behaviour and attitudes towards our democratic institutions is fundamental to the efficient workings of An Coimisiún. We are also very interested on which measurement indicators and methodologies An Coimisiún will use to investigate important behavioural matters such as voter fatigue.

# Strand B: Electoral Law, Electoral Systems, and Electoral Infrastructure

## CONSTITUENCY REVIEWS

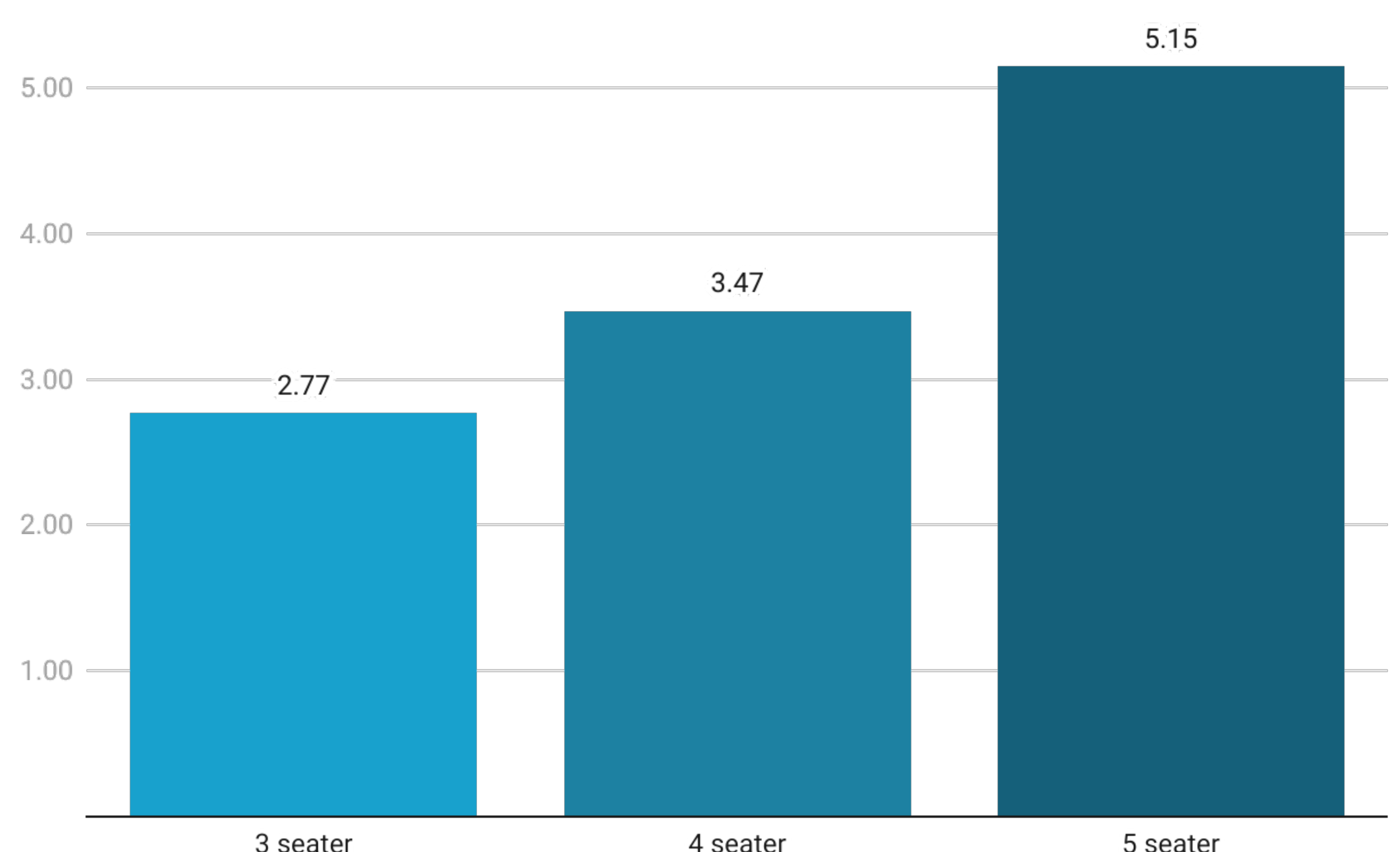
We agree that with the current make-up of Ireland's constitutional provisions and electoral law, the sustainability of a 5-seat maximum in each Dáil constituency cannot be guaranteed, and that more 3-seat constituencies is inevitable and county populations continue to grow.

Our positions, and one of many other organisations and academics, is that constituencies with a larger and more attainable threshold (quota) can lead to more proportional representation on both the local constituency and the national scale. At the time of the last election, the average amount of parties elected per constituency, measured nationally, was 3.87. There is a clear correlation between the number of parties returned and the number of seats in the constituency. The 5-seaters returned more parties on average, nationally, than seats available, highlighting the different political possibilities that one 5-seater may return compared to another.

### Figure

The average number of parties returned nationally, in each constituency grouping.

We consider each independent a distinct 'party', and have excluded the automatic re-election of the Ceann Comhairle.





## POSTAL VOTING

Ireland Votes welcomes the call for research investigating an expansion of the current postal voting-eligible groups. One of Ireland Votes' core missions is to increase voter registration and voter turnout, and any study which seeks to conclude whether or not a policy change makes it easier for a resident of Ireland to vote — such as postal voting — should be welcomed.

In addition, if the regulations regarding postal voting were relaxed, thus increasing the subsequent number of postal votes, accurate data recording would be vital to analysis in a longitudinal survey as outlined in Strand A. In the 2020 Dáil Election, 19,687 postal ballots were cast, or 0.89% of the total valid poll. We do not have any data on where these ballots are from within a constituency as they are treated separately from the boxes from polling stations, thus jeopardizing the accuracy of identifying low-turnout areas. This would be of particular concern if levels of postal voting in Ireland increase substantially, such as 21.0% of valid votes at the 2019 UK General Election.

## BY-ELECTIONS

An Coimisiún's research proposal to investigate an alternative list is very intriguing and would, in theory, benefit a constituency of ensuring proportional representation regardless of a resignation. It is our view that this would reduce the obstacles and pressures on a sitting TD or Senator investigating whether or not they should resign.

It may also be worth investigating the sufficient number of candidates on an alternative list if a rule change such as this were to be implemented.

## UNITARY ELECTORAL REGISTER

Ireland Votes believes that there should be a National Electoral Register overseen by An Coimisiún. The incoherence of the current local authority-led registers allows for an unknown level of voter duplication and unavoidable irregularities. If An Coimisiún oversaw a national database which was fed into by the local authorities, not only would this result in a more seamless running of electoral events, but aid the accuracy of measuring turnout levels.

# Strand C: Integrity of Electoral Events

Ireland Votes believes that the responsibilities outlined in section 68.1 of the 2022 Act provides An Coimisiún with great opportunities to develop a culture of quality enhancement and quality assurance in Irish elections. Post-electoral reviews will allow, in a view we share with An Coimisiún, the identification of areas for improvement in both online and physical election environments.



# Strand D: Education, Public Engagement, and Inclusion

Ireland Votes agrees with An Coimisiún that it is vital to increase political engagement of under-served and under-reached groups. This underscores the importance of the data gathering operation under Strand A. Only if we have detailed and reliable turnout/voting statistics on a box by box level will we be able to understand the dynamics underpinning disparities in engagement.

Ireland Votes also contends that it is worthwhile conducting research into lowering the voting age to 16. The recent introduction of pre-registration has demonstrated that people aged between 16-17 have a keen interest in the affairs of the nation, and the success of such initiatives in Scotland merit investigation here.





# Important to Us



# Strand A

Ireland Votes believes that, by far, strand A is the most important proposed research question. We believe that a multi-layered and comprehensive rolling data collection study is of vital importance to ensure quality enhancement and development in our elections and referendums.

In our view, this research question overlaps with several of An Coimisiún's other research proposals, including but not limited to the expansion of postal voting and a unitary electoral register. In any study which surveys voter behaviour, attitudes, confidence, etc, it is of the utmost importance that the data collection be accurate and reliable, to ensure confidence and trust in our electoral systems.

Not only would a rolling voter study/data collection archive be useful to academics or NGOs in the field, but also useful to An Coimisiún itself in analysing potential feedback on any information campaigns it may run ahead of an electoral event, again, ensuring quality enhancement and development.





# **Additional Research Projects**



# Exploring alternative voting systems

Ireland votes believes that our PR-STV exceeds the vast majority of alternative systems around the world. However, it is not as proportional as it could be. Although STV has almost perfected the balance of the local and national politician, we think that Ireland could take it a step further.

## PR-STV / MMP HYBRID

We believe that it is worthwhile for An Coimisiún to research what impacts an even more nationally proportional STV and MMP hybrid voting system would have on our electoral system. This system would retain our favourite things about STV, while ensuring that the national seat count reflects the national popular vote more accurately. This would, in our view, prevent past occurrences in STV when the leading party would get what has been called the winner's 'boost' in an obscure twist in an electoral system which aims to prevent unproportional representation.





# Comments



# Our Comments

We at Ireland Votes would like to express our utmost appreciation for An Coimisiún's work in the draft proposal. Many of the research questions posed in the document are bold and thorough. We look forward to seeing what An Coimisiún's strategy following the feedback from the draft proposal, and we hope that many of the innovating approaches incorporated in the document will be implemented in the long-run. The potential impacts of some changes, such as those outlined in strands A and B, will be game-changing for research on voter behaviour and confidence in Ireland.

We look forward to seeing what is next.

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