

Subject: FW: New submission from Research Form

From: The Electoral Commission <noreply@electoralcommission.eu>

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To: ELC Research <research@electoralcommission.ie>

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1. What is your view on the five proposed research strands? Are there amendments or additions you would suggest?

I particularly welcome the emphasis on

- > Longitudinal studies, which are needed to understand and respond to evolving threats
- > Post-vote analysis, which should allow all democratic actors to learn and evolve, and for regulations to be updated at a more speedy pace
- > Curiosity driven / blue sky research, which acknowledges the realities of an ever changing landscape around democracy and voting

Specific strands:

Strand A: Longitudinal study

It would be great to see clarification on access to the data generated under this strand; ideally it would be public access / open data in usable formats. Polling data in particular is something that is of great use to a variety of democratic actors (inc. media & civil society) but often financially prohibitive

Making data interoperable with internationally comparative data where possible

Strand B: Electoral Law, Systems & Infrastructure

While electoral finance is not currently within the remit of the Electoral Commission, it is a very important part of ensuring integrity and trust in the integrity of elections. This strand would be diminished if it did not include research into political financial laws, the extent to which their enforcement infrastructure is adequate, and any developments or changes in the way campaigns are funded (eg. the emerging use of online platforms by candidates, paid for content online etc.)

The inclusion of the review of the Electoral Act 1997 is welcome, and should include space to examine other lacunae in electoral rules, such as those in the IDG on Election Security reports in 2018 & 2019 on international interference

Strand C: Integrity of electoral events

While post-electoral event reviews are essential, it would be good to allow for research which identifies and flags in real time threats to election integrity. This would allow for rapid response (by the Commission, but also parties, campaigners and civil society) and ensure that voters are informed prior to casting their ballots

This is particularly the case for capturing trends in campaigning, narratives (including d/misinformation), and social media. It would also allow for capturing digital ephemera, which needs to be archived in real time or it can vanish (the National Library has a digital political ephemera collection, with some limitations)

I do not believe that it is viable to wait until parts IV & V have commenced to conduct research into online political ads and other digital threats; this would waste valuable learning opportunities in 2024, and be a missed opportunity to ensure that the Commission is ready to act once those parts commence

This strand would be strengthened by ensuring that there are a variety of post electoral event analysis commissioned, both to allow for the value around diversity to be put into action (ie. you might want a specific researcher or group to look at participation of a marginalised group); and to allow for different timelines, acknowledging the slower pace of deeper academic work

Strand D: Education, Public Engagement & Inclusion

Worth considering is investments in either independent evaluations of voter and/ or candidate mobilisation efforts, or action oriented research projects which allow for the deployment of rigorously evaluated beta projects to support participation

This could include grants made available to creative / arts / media / sporting orgs to try out ideas for encouraging participation, with external support to evaluate impact

2. Which of the research questions under section 4 would you consider most important and why?

I think that they are all essential; my personal bias is towards the electoral integrity research, but I do not think that any one strand can work without the others.

I do particularly like the inclusion of the "Blue sky" strand, which shows a flexibility and openness to new ideas and adaptation.

3. Are there additional research projects that you consider important to promote and enhance Ireland's democracy and electoral events? If yes, please specify?

Political finance is the big missing piece here – even though the responsibilities for enforcement do not lie with the Commission, I believe that understanding this area is inextricably linked to the remit of the Commission and it needs to be included in the research agenda.

4. Are there any other comments or observations that you wish to make regarding An Coimisiún's research programme?

General notes:

It is positive that An Coimisiún will be investing in democratic and electoral research; this investment will strengthen Ireland's democracy and increase resilience to electoral threats

I appreciate the open approach taken and opportunity to input in this consultation

At a high level, areas where I think the strategy could be improved include:

Emphasis on the need for both academic and non-academic research

Inclusion of the necessity of supporting research that makes public in as close to real time as possible monitoring and analysis of campaigning, narratives (including disinformation) and expenditure, to ensure that voters has as much information as possible prior to polling day

An emphasis on transparency and openness in research outputs

On vision and values:

This section is welcome. Including how these values will be used in practice will build trust that they will be implemented. Including:

- >How they will be used in decision making on calls / grants / proposals
- >If an assessment against these values will be in annual reporting

I value the inclusion of transparency in the delivering of the functions – I think this can be extended to include the products of research investments

- > At value level, a commitment to ensuring that as many outputs from the Commission's research investments are as publicly available as possible
- > This could translate into requirements or guidelines alongside funding; that academic papers are not (only) behind paywalls; that maps / images / data created are shared under Creative Commons licences, that researchers engage in public education and impact work alongside their research etc.

Name

Liz Carolan

Email

[REDACTED]

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I am responding as an Individual