

Introduction

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for 59 voluntary youth organisations and use our collective expertise to act on issues that impact on young people. Our role as the National Representative Youth Work Organisation is recognised in legislation (Youth Work Act, 2001). The work of NYCI is based on principles of equality, social justice and equal participation for all. NYCI's vision is of an Ireland where young people in every community are empowered through excellent youth work to realise their potential and actively participate in an inclusive society.

During the development of this submission, NYCI held two focus groups with young people to ascertain their views on the Electoral Commission's proposed Research Programme. These focus groups informed some of the points made within this submission, and quotes to illustrate points are included throughout. In summary, NYCI broadly welcomes the Draft Research Programme 2024-2026 from An Coimisiún Toghcháin, and hopes that the Commission will consider the following when finalising the plan:

- i. Examination of expanding the franchise to 16 in Ireland should be prioritised by the Commission and should be one of the first research projects completed.
- ii. Young people should be included as a specific and unique cohort in every research topic. Every step of research development and implementation should include youth specific methods and design to ensure the highest quality of data on young people and democratic life. This work must include targeted measures to ensure minority groups of young people are meaningfully included.
- iii. The 'value and importance of youth work in promoting democratic participation of young people' should be considered as a worthwhile area of blue-sky research during the lifespan of this research programme.

Submission questions

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

NYCI believes that we are at a critical juncture for young people's engagement with our democracy. We believe that young people are political, capable, and that they have a right to be supported to participate fully in democratic life. However, a robust and reliable evidence base is essential to ensure that conditions are in place to ensure that all young people are supported to participate fully. Our broad comment on the five proposed research strands is that **young people should be included as a specific and unique cohort in every research topic, and every step of research development and implementation should include youth specific methods and design to ensure the highest quality of data on young people and democratic life.**

There is reason to believe that young people as a specific cohort require attention by any party interested in promoting and protecting democracy. Recent evidence from the OECD would suggest that currently in Ireland, young people have much lower levels of trust in government than those aged over 30.¹ This is not just a national problem, as research from Cambridge University found that

young people's faith in democratic politics in general is lower than any other age group, and it is among 18–34-year-olds that satisfaction with democracy is in steepest decline.ⁱⁱ

On the other hand, there is evidence that young people want to be involved. A survey by IPSOS in 2022 showed that young people's most important expectations of the European Year of Youth were that society and decision-makers listen more to youth's opinions and needs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nationally, the ESRI recently reported on some of the elements involved in promoting the civic and political engagement of young adults, including volunteering, involvement in sport and others, but noted that "there has been a lack of systematic research on civic and political engagement among young adults in Ireland."^{iv} Many questions remain around young people and Irish democracy, and crucially, what works to promote their engagement.

The Electoral Commission's proposed research strands cover a broad range of important topics, the findings of which will inform decisions on how Ireland 'does' democracy into the future. NYCI welcomes the Commission's commitment to focus on groups who have "in the past been under-reached or marginalised from political and democratic processes." We argue that the Electoral Commission should recognise young people as one of these under-reached groups, including those who have not yet reached the voting age. We believe that the experience and views of younger people should be researched and reported on for each strand and each research project the Electoral Commission conducts, as a specified and distinct cohort. Understanding the perspectives and needs of young people across all issues is crucial to inform the work of strengthening young people's participation in our democracy now, and into the future.

NYCI is confident that An Coimisiún will receive a wealth and depth of knowledge and perspectives from young people when included in research topics. When shown the proposed strands of research and potential research questions, NYCI's focus group of young people had valuable contributions to make on issues ranging from party loyalty among young people, to the impact that misinformation and disinformation has on young people. They also clearly demonstrated how aspects of the proposed strands raise questions that in relation to young people need unique consideration:

"How many young people are engaged with politics outside of voting itself... how many, if they email their TDs, do they feel it goes anywhere, and then especially for young people who might be disillusioned with politics generally as well. It would be quite interesting to look at that?"

"What do young people value, as citizens compared to the majority if the population? Research is there on the European level but not nationally. Understanding what young people value in their democratic engagements and how they see voting could be very valuable to see how to increase voter turnout and participation."

Some from the focus group also noted that young people are not a homogenous group, and that the needs and voices of minority young people should be researched, and recommendations made to strengthen the engagement of those young people:

"I went to a DEIS school and it was very, very diverse, there were people from many countries in Europe, and even outside of Europe... they don't really know anything about the Irish system... especially if they didn't do history in school, they don't know the history or the parties, so I don't think they have enough information to even make that informed decision"

It is NYCI's opinion that all electoral campaigns and voter registration campaigns should be underpinned by targeted engagement with minority groups, including recent immigrants, about how to engage with democracy, especially ahead of the Local Elections.

The 'Young Ireland' National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028^v sets the national policy context for including young people as a specific research cohort. The policy aims to "ensure that children and young people are a central part of everyone's agenda." This includes the priority of collecting better and more reliable data and evidence on the needs of children and young people, and improvements to further enable direct participation by children and young people. An Comisiún will be making important recommendations based on its research, and it is vital that young people's needs and experiences are included across topics, to ensure compliance with Young Ireland.

NYCI warmly welcomes that the Electoral Commission has appointed a young person as a member of its Research Advisory Committee. This signals that An Comisiún is eager to include young people in all broader research, rather than only in elements directly about them such as the voting ages. The inclusion of a young person at all stages of development and conduction of research will ensure a higher quality of youth engagement and ultimately better data that better represents the population.

Building on this, NYCI's overall comment on the five proposed research strands is that the Electoral Commission should include a collecting specific age-related data and include a focus on youth in all research projects conducted over the life span of this programme. The ability to extrapolate age specific data on the broad range of topics will ensure that state responses to recommendations include the specific and unique needs of young people. It will also assist state agencies and NGOs who are tasked with supporting young people and creating the conditions for their participation in democracy to flourish.

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

NYCI believes that **'the voting age' under strand D, specifically extending the franchise to young people aged 16 and 17 in Ireland, is of utmost importance and is long overdue decisive action.** NYCI believes that this question should be prioritised for the first piece of research that the Commission will conducts, due to the significant public interest over a long period of time, it's importance to young people's rights, and because of the potential positive impact such a change may bring to Irish democracy.

"Vote at 16" is already firmly on the agenda of politicians and the public, having been included in the most recent Programme for Government. As the Commission outlines in its draft research programme, Ireland's Convention on the Constitution recommended that Ireland lower its voting age

to 16. In the years since, the Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2016 and Thirty-Ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Right to Vote at 16) Bill 2021 have been debated in the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Most recently, the Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2021 was debated in the Seanad, with broad cross-party support. However, the Bill was delayed until the Electoral Commission could research the area^{vi}. Indeed, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government specifically included Vote at 16 in his request of topics for An Coimisiún Toghcháin to examine. ^{vii} There has been public and political interest building in this issue, and while the debate has spanned over an extended period of time, corresponding action to deliver a change in the voting age has stalled. NYCI argues that there is a risk that without definitive action on lowering the voting age, there is a danger of perpetual debate without evidence-based action on the issue. The Electoral Commission can play an important role in not only addressing this risk but providing a strong evidence basis to support our democracy in its natural evolution, to set out informed and robust policy options for decision-makers and to improve public understanding of the issues and experience in other jurisdictions.

NYCI recognises that the Electoral Commission is impartial on relevant matters until research has been conducted and recommendations made. From NYCI's perspective, extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds is an important step in recognising the rights of young people to participate in their society. We argue that within the context of strong education through CSPE and Politics and Society, as well as high levels of engagement with social, political and environmental movements, including within youth wings of political parties, that Ireland could reap the benefits of extending the franchise. Research from the Scottish Independence Referendum campaign, where 75% of 16- and 17-year-olds voted, shows that expanding the franchise also has positive impacts for issues around long-term voter turnout^{viii}- a key issues that the Commission will be grappling with.

Young participants from our focus group agreed:

“Voting at 16 ensures a new generation will have their voices heard on issues that may be directly impacting them and will towards the future.”

“[we need] Representation for young people because they can work, pay taxes, etc”

NYCI recognise the importance of having structural supports alongside the lowering of the voting age to ensure a successful vote at 16, where young people are supported to become politically literate, have access to good quality information and feel equipped to vote. There is already a vast amount of research on the subject, which if reviewed by the Commission could inform Ireland's approach. Case studies, on Austria^{ix}, Scotland^x and Australia^{xi} for example, include important lessons around positive impact such as increased voter turnout, the importance of political socialisation and longitudinal data, and benefits or risks of stepwise approach, which may be applicable in the Irish context. In NYCI's opinion, examining extending the franchise is a research topic that could have positive impacts for Irish democracy, such as building voting habits early, increasing participation and improving faith in democracy, and for that reason should be a priority for the Commission during the span of this research programme.

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

NYCI suggests that examining the 'value and importance of youth work in promoting democratic participation of young people' would be a worthwhile area of blue-sky research, the findings of which could positively enhance youth politicisation, and balance some of the risk of only offering politicisation within the formal education system.

The introduction of Politics and Society for the Leaving certificate in 2016 showed the state's eagerness to support young people to participate in democracy. The formal education system has a role to play in supporting the political knowledge of young people, but we know that there are many other areas of political socialisation for young people, such as parents, peers, school media and voluntary associations^{xii}.

Political education within mainstream education is not without risks. For example, arguments have been made that education systems can enhance and entrench socioeconomic inequalities in political engagement.^{xiii} One participant in NYCI's focus group commented on the disparity of availability of Politics and Society as a subject across same sex schools and private schools in her local area:

"[Politics and Society as a leaving cert subject] is offered to a lot of boy's schools but not offered at all in all girls schools or a lot of mixed schools don't offer it. Is there a connection there between like political engagement and like... what we found was that it was [available in] a lot of private schools or like highly accredited all boys schools and that kind of thing"

There is a foundation of research in Ireland which sets the context for examining other areas of political education outside a school setting. The ESRI's recent study into the civic and political engagement among young adults in Ireland found that volunteering and involvement in out-of-school activities plays a role in channelling young people towards particular kinds of political engagement. Young people involved in cultural activities in adolescence tend to express more interest in politics and to be more involved in political activities.^{xiv} While youth clubs and youth work organisations such as guides/scouts were included in this study, they were within the wider category of 'clubs'. This means that findings may not have fully captured the potential depth and scope of impact that youth work as a specific practise has on youth engagement with political life.

Internationally, there is evidence that could inform this research proposal too. A literature review examining youth political participation from the Council of Europe and European Commission found that "youth workers play a role of connector and translator, transferring information about political processes to young people, and also informing policy makers about young people's needs."^{xv} A study in Germany argued that policy practise is considered essential in youth work practice, and noted that there is a benefit to youth work in reaching marginalised youth.^{xvi} In Ireland, [NYCI's 'Young Voices'](#) is an example of dynamic engagement of young people to inform policy, and fulfils the objectives of the EU Youth Dialogue.

The Youth Work Act 2001 in Ireland defines youth work as a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation. Youth Work is provided primarily by voluntary youth

work organisations. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Roderick O’Gorman recently launched [‘A Vision for Youth Work’](#), which sets out a vision for the future direction of youth work in Ireland over the next 10 years. Aspect 4 of the vision¹ and aspect 7² are particularly relevant to the proposed research above and demonstrate that the sector is already playing a role in supporting young people in participating and will continue to do so into the future.

Some of the key research questions that might be examined within this proposal might include:

1. Does involvement in youth work impact young people’s voting habits?
2. Does involvement in youth work impact young people’s participation in political activities such as signing a petition, or attending a protest?
3. Where is politicisation happening within youth work settings, and what are the structural elements in place within the space to support this? Are programmes delivering specific outcomes related to political life, or is politicisation happening in an informal manner?
4. Does the diversity and values of youth work spaces in Ireland contribute to young people’s political attitudes?

NYCI agrees with An Coimisiún’s assertion that “Ireland’s democracy needs to be nurtured” and we believe that the youth work sector can, and is already, playing a positive role in nurturing young people’s involvement with local, national, European and global politics. We believe that capturing evidence of this in an Irish context would result in data driven policy decisions that would increase and enhance youth participation and ensure that future generations of voters have greater faith in our democracy.

¹ ‘Young people and youth workers engage actively, enthusiastically and creatively with the world around them, making connections and making a difference in a range of ways and at a range of levels’;

² ‘The distinctive nature and contribution of youth work is widely recognised and valued within society as a whole and is strongly and explicitly endorsed and supported as a key element of national policy for children and young people.’

Endnotes

ⁱ Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Key Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions//www.oecd.org/governance/trust-in-government/

ⁱⁱ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Wenger, D., Rand, A. and M. Slade. 2020. "Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?" Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

ⁱⁱⁱ IPSOS [Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth | Ipsos](#) 2022

^{iv} 'Civic and Political engagement among young adults in Ireland' James Laurence and Emer Smyth. Research series number 171, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs171>

^v [gov.ie - Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People \(0-24\) 2023-2028 \(www.gov.ie\)](#)

^{vi} [Electoral \(Amendment\) \(Voting at 16\) Bill 2021: Second Stage – Seanad Éireann \(26th Seanad\) – Tuesday, 7 Nov 2023 – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

^{vii} Parliamentary question 54908/23

^{viii} Votes-at-16 in Scotland 2014 – 2021, [Votes at 16 in Scotland \(ed.ac.uk\)](#)

^{ix} 'Voting at 16 in Practice: A Review of the Austrian Case' 2020 Julian Aichholzer, Sylvia Kitzinger

^x 'How Young People in Scotland Experience the Right to Vote at 16: Evidence on 'Votes-at-16' in Scotland from Qualitative Work with Young People' Parliamentary Affairs (2021) 74, 563–580 doi:10.1093/pa/gsab017

^{xi} Ian McAllister (2014) 'The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia: Evaluating the evidence' Australian Journal of Political Science, 49:1, 68-83,

^{xii} Quintelier, E. (2015). Engaging Adolescents in Politics: The Longitudinal Effect of Political Socialization Agents. Youth & Society, 47(1), 51-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X13507295>

^{xiii} Hoskins, B. and J.G. Janmaat (2019). *Education, democracy and inequality: Political engagement and citizenship education in Europe*, Boston, MA: Springer

^{xiv} 'Civic and Political engagement among young adults in Ireland' James Laurence and Emer Smyth. Research series number 171, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs171>

^{xv} 'YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION' Literature review, 2019, Marina Galstyan. [1ff0bb91-a77b-f52e-25b4-5c8bd45a0c36 \(coe.int\)](#)

^{xvi} Kessler, S. Political Actions of Youth Workers. J of Pol Practice & Research 3, 316–333 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42972-022-00067-0>