

# Summary of Research Submissions

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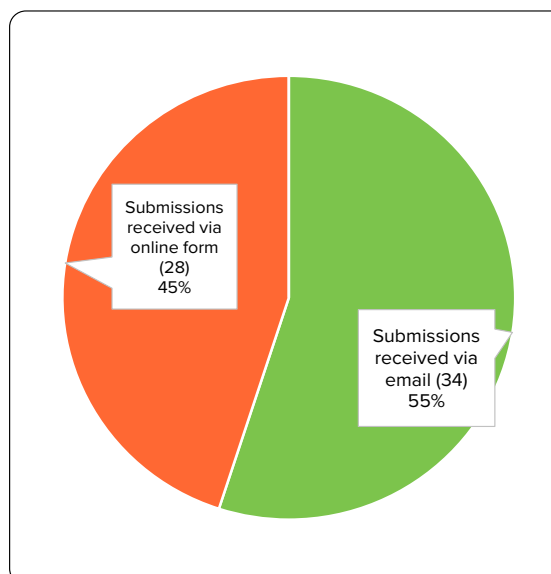
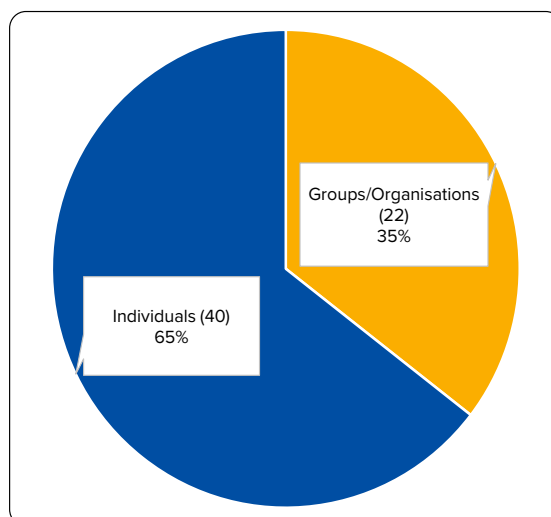
# 1. Introduction

Section 64 of the *Electoral Reform Act 2022* sets out that An Coimisiún Toghcháin “may commission or conduct research on electoral policy and procedure, including on matters relating to the discharge of its functions under this Act, and may, arising from that research, make such recommendations to the Minister and the Government as it considers appropriate.” On 10 November 2023, in light of this statutory research function, An Coimisiún Toghcháin published its Draft Research Programme 2024-2026 for public consultation.

Submissions could be made through the online form provided, by email or by post. The bilingual Draft Research Programme was formally launched by the organisation’s Chairperson Ms. Justice Marie Baker at an event in Dublin City University, alongside some of the university’s political science students. The document was published in physical format and posted on An Coimisiún’s website and social media channels. The research page of An Coimisiún’s website was visited over 1,000 times between November 2023 and the closing date in February 2024. Many respondents welcomed the fact that An Coimisiún had published a draft of the Research Programme and facilitated public engagement regarding its contents in advance of finalisation. Respondents were advised that their submissions would be published, all of which are all now available for viewing on [www.electoralcommission.ie](http://www.electoralcommission.ie).<sup>1</sup>

In total, An Coimisiún received 62 submissions. These were received from a broad range of stakeholders and members

of the public. Submissions ranged from two lines to 18 pages in length. Many submissions provided views as to which topics should be included in An Coimisiún’s Research Programme, whilst others focused more so on individuals’ and organisations’ own opinions about the potential electoral reforms that may result from such research. This combination of opinions and research proposals revealed not only an interest in An Coimisiún’s Research Programme, but also in the specific issues that may feature therein.



<sup>1</sup>. Subject to any redactions deemed necessary by An Coimisiún

## 2. Summary

### 2.1 Strand-based approach

The strand based approach was largely welcomed and a number of submissions endorsed individual strands. Some additional strands were proposed, such as one addressing democratic systems and one focusing on informal and non-traditional democratic participation. However, there was no pattern here and generally submissions noted the breadth and comprehensiveness of the proposed structure, and suggested it would facilitate illuminating research on a broad range of topics.

- *‘Each of the proposed research strands are important to enhancing the quality of Irish democracy.’ (RS45)*
- *‘I like the five strands as laid out and I think the way they have been subdivided is quite clear.’ (RS37)*
- *‘I think the research strands will shed light on many important issues.’ (RS29)*



### 2.2 Strand A: Longitudinal survey research and data collection

Strand A (Longitudinal Survey Research and Data Collection) and the associated establishment of a longitudinal National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS) were explicitly referenced in approximately 16 submissions. The establishment of such a study was welcomed by many, with several submissions noting the potential for the NEDS to provide rich data for political scientists, relevant stakeholders, and the wider public regarding the Irish population’s evolving attitudes towards democracy and politics more generally. It was further noted that the NEDS could provide invaluable information to underpin and guide An Coimisiún’s other research priorities and projects.

*‘fundamental to the efficient workings of An Coimisiún.’ (RS39)*

*‘Longitudinal studies will allow for a more accurate analysis of attitudes, motivations, and electoral practices over time.’ (RS47)*

As well as expressing satisfaction with the establishment of the NEDS, a number of submissions echoed An Coimisiún's assertion that all NEDS data should be available freely to all. Further to this, it was suggested that all subsequent peer reviewed articles pertaining to NEDS data should also be made open source.

*'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.'* (RS46)

Submissions referencing Strand A featured a broad range of proposals concerning the methodology and contents of the NEDS. Submissions called for several demographic criteria to be explicitly incorporated in NEDS surveys, including ethnic minority status, members of the Travelling Community, age, gender, geographic location, race, socio-economic status, and level of education. It was further suggested that the standard disability questions from the Census should be reflected in NEDS surveys, as well as analyses of political participation at different levels of government, and across different election types. It was proposed in a number of submissions that the NEDS be aligned with other longitudinal surveys so as to maximise the potential for NEDS data to be directly compared to other national and international datasets.



### **2.3 Strand B: Electoral law, electoral systems and electoral infrastructure**

Strand B (Electoral Law, Electoral Systems and Electoral Infrastructure) of the Draft

Research Programme outlined a broad range of potential research projects, all of which were referenced in multiple submissions, although some received more attention than others. In total, approximately 44 submissions (71%) discussed Strand B or its associated projects, tying with Strand D (Education, public engagement and inclusion) as the most mentioned strand during the public consultation process.

*'Strand B is an important draft in relation to electoral reform given the shortcomings of Ireland's electoral system.'* (RS62)

An Coimisiún's Constituency Review Report published in August 2023 proposed that research be conducted by the organisation regarding a number of issues directly related to the Constituency Review process. In particular, it was suggested that research be conducted on the ratio of TDs to the State's population, constituency magnitude, and the methodology of the Review itself. This proved to be a particularly popular topic in the Draft Research Programme, featuring in approximately 28 submissions, making it the second most featured research topic across the public submissions. Constituency magnitude, in particular, featured approximately 22 of these.

A clear majority of submissions referencing the Constituency Review were decidedly supportive of it being included in the Research Programme, or at a minimum expressed a preference as to what should be included in this prospective research project. A number of changes were proposed, with a particular enthusiasm for the introduction of larger constituencies and the reform of the Constitutional ratio of TDs to population.

*'Significant research ought to be devoted to the issue of constituency design and makeup, in particular but not limited to Dáil constituencies.'*  
(RS55)

Among the proposals included in submissions regarding Constituency Review research were analyses of the following:

- Constituencies' Adherence to County Boundaries.
- Fixed Constituency Boundaries.
- The frequency of Constituency Reviews.
- Inter-Constituency Representation Variance and its relationship with Constituency Magnitude.
- Smaller Constituencies for European Parliament Elections.
- The Effects of Constituency Magnitude on Marginalised Groups' Representation.

The use of posters was also flagged as a potential area for research under Strand B, and ultimately appeared in approximately nine of the 62 submissions. Many of the submissions were more around views on

posters themselves rather than on the merits of it as a research topic. Concerns were raised in several submissions regarding a complete ban on election posters, whilst acknowledging existing environmental concerns. Notwithstanding this, some submissions acknowledged that certain reforms may be required in this area.

The Draft Research Programme further proposed, under Strand B, a review of the *Electoral Act 1997*. Approximately seven respondents cited this in their submissions, most of whom proposed a review of political funding and/or spending regulations. It was also proposed that An Coimisiún consider recommendations previously made by SIPO in this regard.



*‘Please research the caps on maximum funding allowed to be spent by election candidates and whether it is appropriate, particularly for presidential and European elections.’ (RS50)*



Research concerning the Register of Electors was featured in approximately 14 of the 62 submissions. There was widespread consensus amongst these respondents that this topic should be investigated by An Coimisiún. A number of research proposals emerged from the submissions including ways to simplify the registration process, automatic registration, the security of the register, allowing voters to register in multiple constituencies, and reforming the Edited Register. It was also proposed that members of marginalised groups be a point of focus in this research, and that an analysis be conducted of how other jurisdictions comply with the EU Web Accessibility Directive.



*‘There is a major issue with voter duplication and this elimination will take time. From our feedback as an organisation (adult literacy/ adult education) there is a real issue with those who have experienced addiction and incarceration or anyone with a chaotic life as they can have no records of the places they lived in.’ (RS52)*



Approximately 11 submissions referenced the proposed research surrounding the reform of Ireland’s bye-election system to fill vacant seats in Dáil Éireann. Submissions contained a diverse range of views on this topic, both for and against any potential reforms of the existing system. This level of interest in the topic of bye-election reform highlighted the merits of its inclusion in An Coimisiún’s Research Programme. While some support was shown for the idea of abolishing Dáil bye-

elections altogether, others expressed reservations regarding the idea of substituting the existing practice with a system of replacement candidate lists, as is currently used for European Parliament elections. Some respondents further suggested that bye-election research be expanded to examine bye-elections other than those to Dáil Éireann.



*‘Bye-elections should be retained at all costs. People have the right to vote for a new TD at a by-election.’ (RS08)*

*‘Bye-elections to be scrapped... last candidate to be eliminated at election to fill vacant seat.’ (RS06)*



Finally, approximately 14 submissions made reference to the extension of postal voting, including suggestions that the timing of postal and special votes be considered as part of any prospective research.



*‘We would urge the Commission to examine best practice for the use of non “in-person day of” voting methods in other states, this could include, for example, postal ballots.’ (RS31)*

*‘With a centrally-managed register, it will make it much easier for voters to update their current residence, so there should be no need in most instances for postal voting.’ (RS07)*





Respondents further proposed a broad range of potential research topics under Strand B which did not feature in the Draft Research Programme, including the following:

Electronic Counting	Ballot Paper Design
Vote Surplus Distribution Systems	Age Limits for Candidates
Politicians' Salaries	Compulsory Voting
Public Representative Terms and Term Limits	Reform of Seanad Éireann / Elections
Sitting Hours in Dáil Éireann	Empowering Local Authorities
Double-Jobbing by TDs	Updating Electoral Divisions
Fixed-Term Parliaments	PR-STV: Shortcomings, Impacts & Alternatives



## 2.4 Strand C: Integrity of electoral events

Strand C (Integrity of Electoral Events) of the Draft Research Programme was also addressed in a broad range of submissions. Firstly, this strand encompasses An Coimisiún's Post Electoral Event Reviews (PEERs), which it is statutorily mandated to conduct in the six months after every electoral event by Section 68 of the *Electoral Reform Act 2022*. An Coimisiún notes the feedback on the design and content of these PEERs, including proposals such as; incorporating non-voters' experiences, analysing how people accessed information during election/referendum campaigns, gathering public reports of mis/disinformation, and including explicit analyses of minority group experiences in the review process. It was further suggested that the election observation element of the PEER process be developed, possibly to include international observers conducting work around Irish electoral events.

***'There also needs to be research into electoral security.'* (RS09)**

Strand C further pertains to An Coimisiún's yet-to-be commenced powers under Parts 4 and 5 of the *Electoral Reform Act 2022*, namely surrounding online political advertising and online misinformation and disinformation, respectively. Approximately 18 submissions addressed these issues, many of which provided suggestions as to how An Coimisiún should address them in future research projects.



### Proposals included analyses of the following:

- Political Advertising in Traditional Media as well as Online
- The Evolving Media Environment and Information Voters Are Exposed to
- How Voters Access & Process Information
- The Use of Artificial Intelligence During Election Campaigns
- Political as well as Electoral Disinformation
- The Extent of Online Interference
- Disinformation's Impact on Democracy
- Actors Involved in Creating and Disseminating Disinformation
- Anxiety Around Electoral Events: Excessive Influences / Information Sources

*‘As well as understanding common trends and techniques relating to electoral disinformation, there are critical decisions that An Coimisiún will make in the future, which should be informed by research.’ (RS03)*

It was further proposed that An Coimisiún conduct real-time monitoring of threats to electoral integrity, commission an independent review of the organisation's online regulatory powers, and focus on researching the remedies to political disenfranchisement that lead to the proliferation of mis- and disinformation. Additionally, the following research topics were recommended under Strand C:

Changes in Political Attitudes & The Impact on Democracy

Candidate Safety, Political Violence & Addresses on Ballot Papers

Regulation of Opinion Polling

Hate Speech by Politicians: Potential Actions

*‘In relation to strand C, I think the perception of electoral integrity could be strengthened from the perspective of deliberate, malign (or other) influences on people's thinking. This would cover, for example, attitude manipulation via algorithms which influence exposure to different types online information content. This is a fundamental threat to election integrity.’ (RS12)*



## **2.5 Strand D: Education, public engagement and inclusion**

In total, approximately 44 submissions (71%) made reference to Strand D (Education, Public Engagement and Inclusion), tying with Strand B as the most mentioned strand in the public consultation process. In particular, Democratic and Electoral Participation featured in approximately 35 submissions, engendering more public interest than any other topic listed in the Draft Research Programme. There was

strong support for research regarding the electoral and wider political experiences, rights, participation and representation of a range of marginalised groups, including women, people experiencing homelessness, members of the Travelling Community, migrants and asylum seekers, the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, voters with literacy issues, and young people.

### **Further proposals stemming from Strand D included:**

The Importance of Youth Work in Promoting Participation	Motivations for Voting / Abstention
The Role of Community Groups in Promoting Participation	Early & Electronic Voting, Flexible & Accessible Locations & the Best Day to Hold an Election
Providing Accessible Electoral Information	How Politics / Voting Made a Positive Difference for Me
Diversity Audit: Gender Balance within Party Membership and Candidates	Irish Language Proficiency Among Candidates
Reserved Seats for Marginalised Groups	Civic, Political and Democracy Education in Schools
Minority & Nested Quotas	How An Coimisiún Can Help Other Countries Improve Transparency
Electoral Fund Raising, Party Expenditure and Donations through a Gendered Lens	Gender Quotas: Best Practice, How They Are Integrated, Attempts to Undermine Them, and Unintended Negative Consequences.
The Impact of Party Fragmentation on Representation in Candidate Selection Processes	Sociological Perspectives on Electoral Sentiment & Understanding of Climate Change

Submissions pertaining to Stand D contained a diverse range of observations and recommendations regarding the content and methodology of the aforementioned, potential research projects under the strand. For example, it was suggested that men and masculinities be studied as part of an analysis of gender in politics, as well as considering why the 'independent' and 'non-traditional' political routes may be no less advantageous for women. Submissions addressing disabled voters proposed that their right to be assisted while voting after 8pm be examined in any future research in this area, as well as their right to a secret ballot. It was proposed that research regarding new arrivals to Ireland consider the impacts of electoral process education on their political participation, their potential fears surrounding the protection of their identity on the Register of Electors, and the challenges posed by ID and address verification processes to their ability to participate in Irish democracy. The latter issue was also raised regarding people experiencing homelessness.

Other submissions suggested that accessibility to public transport on polling days be examined, as well as best practice in passive/informal political and civic education and informal/non-traditional modes of political participation. One submission proposed that turnout among different categories of electors on the Register be compared to one another as part of participation research, while another called for an independent evaluation of voter and candidate mobilisation efforts. It was also suggested that An Coimisiún should seek out these marginalised groups' views within their communities including through local service providers.

The importance of the intersectionality of different marginalised groups was further stressed in some submissions. Another respondent asserted that An Coimisiún should not focus solely on those who struggle to be selected or elected in the democratic process, but also on those who are dissuaded from participating at all. Finally, one submission proposed that research under Strand D should encompass all nine disadvantaged groups identified in the Equality Acts, not just a select few.

*'When it comes to voting, people experiencing homelessness tend to have much lower enrolment and turnout rates than the general population.'* (RS23)

*"We would like to see a research project on LGBTQI+ participation in politics... LGBTQI+ people are currently underrepresented at all levels of Irish politics.'* (RS10)

*'A recurring issue in our work to promote migrant political participation is the lack of awareness on the right to vote by members of migrant communities.'* (RS56)

*Travellers encounter many obstacles from participating equally in political democracy... these are also worsened by a legacy of marginalisation by the political system.'* (RS60)

An Coimisiún notes that some of the submissions made under Strand D focused more so on calling for specific electoral reforms and wider political change rather than proposing topics for inclusion in the Research Programme. Where relevant, these suggestions will be used to inform An Coimisiún's other functions, such as education, voter engagement and the provision of information.

Also featured in Strand D was the voting age. Research regarding the extension of the franchise to people below the age of 18 was mentioned in approximately 20 submissions, ranking third among all research topics in the Draft Research Programme. It was clear that this issue evoked a strong reaction and interest among those who participated in the public consultation, with a considerable number of submissions arguing for and against a change of the voting age. It was further proposed that such research consider the neurological development of young people, as well as the franchise of elections to Seanad Éireann.

*'Examination of expanding the franchise to 16 in Ireland should be prioritised' (RS57)*

*'The voting age should stay at 18. It is doubtful if the majority of people under that age would have enough knowledge and appreciation of public affairs to form a mature judgment.'* (RS11)

*'It is important for any healthy democracy that those impacted by decisions of government can have a part in deciding who governs, where they hold capacity to make such decisions.'* (RS14)

A further research topic flagged under Strand D is Residency and Voting. This research project featured in approximately 11 submissions with some endorsing its inclusion in the final Research Programme, while some others were fervently opposed to reform in this field. Proposals for inclusion in any such research included examining the introduction of voting from abroad (e.g. at Irish embassies), better defining the term 'ordinarily resident' found in electoral law, and re-visiting the current 18-month limit on voting rights for Irish people who no longer reside in the State.

*'Ireland's electoral system is the most restrictive in Europe... we believe this violates the EU's core principle of freedom of movement.'* (RS43)

*'No representation without taxation. Irish residents abroad on the day of election should not be entitled to vote.'* (RS02)



## 2.6 Strand E: Blue sky/ curiosity-driven research

The inclusion of Strand E (Blue Sky/ Curiosity-Driven Research) in the Draft Research Programme was one of its mostly positively received elements, with near-universally positive feedback among submissions in which it was referenced. Optimism was expressed that the strand would provide opportunities for innovative research projects, exploring issues and utilising approaches other than those one may expect to see in research programmes such as this. One submission did caution against over-relying on such innovative approaches at the expense of existing research and research practices, while another called on An Coimisiún to prioritise other strands in the initial years of its Research Programme.

As well as the wide array of research proposals outlined above pertaining to electoral and political reform, some submissions suggested that An Coimisiún conduct research regarding its own status and functions. For example, there were calls for research on public perceptions of An Coimisiún, An Coimisiún's functions compared to those of other Electoral Management Bodies, the potential for An Coimisiún to receive more powers in the future, and a review of the effectiveness of An Coimisiún's communication methods. Furthermore, several submissions suggested that An Coimisiún should compile a national archive of historical election results and materials.

An Coimisiún Toghcháin would like to thank all individuals and organisations that took the time to engage with the public consultation process. All submissions were carefully considered and used to shape this Research Programme.



*'I do particularly like the inclusion of the "Blue sky" strand, which shows a flexibility and openness to new ideas and adaptation.'*  
(RS46)

*'Strand E especially stands out to our organisation, where it is great to see the Commission plainly interested in the proactive sourcing of solutions to difficult, open-ended problems.'* (RS53)



