

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?

The draft programme is most welcome. Thank you for inviting our feedback.

My background is in computer science, software engineering, data analytics and AI. I was an academic researcher for many years. I also have a strong interest in journalism that serves the democratic process - valuing in particular regular reporting on county council meetings and courts.

There is an inherent tension between the research required to investigate something using existing methods, and research that would create academic value. Academic value comes from novelty - PhDs must deliver it, publications are dependent upon it. The business of the Commission can be served with the existing methods and does not require novelty. That tension needs to be recognised and addressed - otherwise there is a danger that it will drive the programme into academic novelty at the expense of delivering the information that the Commission needs to conduct its own business.

My concern is that there may be an over emphasis on novel research: it is evident throughout the tone of the draft, in the descriptions of the research strands themselves, and in the provision of a 'blue sky' research strand. The Commission seems to be moving into an expansion/aggression stance with its research policy, rather than focusing on consolidating/defence. Ireland is behind the international community, both political and academic, when it comes to its awareness of the very real threat posed by external actors seeking to exert influence on the outcomes of votes here. I know this because I engaged back in 2016 with the major political parties to alert them to the threat: specifically with regard to the use of Facebook to manipulate voting patterns, and the relatively little that would need to be done to secure the required number of votes for one or two candidates to secure seats. This was prior to the Cambridge Analytica Scandal breaking in 2018, and they were adamant at the time that this was not a real threat, and that no counter measures were necessary. They simply did not believe it was possible. I understand that that perspective has shifted enormously since then, but it is still evident that our politicians in general do not realise the extent to which they can be personally manipulated, and the extent to which their voters can.

I conducted a preliminary review of research articles published on interference in Irish

elections - the relative absence, especially when compared to those investigations conducted in other countries, like the UK and US, is striking. The methodology for conducting that research is well established and already available. It does not require novel thinking - but it is very much necessary for us to be able to understand to what extent we, as a nation, are already under influence/attack. For examples of relatively straight forward research, which need only be applied in the Irish context, see for instance, 'Characterizing social media manipulation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election', by Emilio Ferrera et al, found here: <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11431/11310>.

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

It is important to note that no specific research questions have been outlined for Strand D: Integrity of Electoral Events. In fact, looking through Section 4, it is possible that no specific research questions have been stated. This is an important point - "Research", as an area of academic knowledge, uses specific phrases and language, and these convey specific meaning to those reading them. "Research questions" take a specific form, and these are absent from Section 4. It is recommended that an expert in research would review the Annual Research Programme prior to publication to correct errors such as these.

Nonetheless, my broader concern relates to Strand C and the absence of any research project that specifically attempts to gauge whether and to what extent interference in the elections due in June of this year can be detected. As I outlined above, the methodology for conducting this research is widely published and available, and the research should be undertaken as a matter of urgency. Ideally, it would also examine any publicly available information (through e.g. X API) that remains available regarding previous voting events in Ireland. With regard to this, it should be noted that X is deprecating aspects of its API and current research programmes should not take for granted that the kinds of social-media data-sharing policies that are benevolent and social-justice minded will remain available in the future - making current research priorities dependent upon them even more urgent.

While the upcoming changes in powers are already in train, there is no reason to wait to conduct investigations into the scale of interference. These could be initiated now. Investigations to detect, measure and monitor external interference would be prioritised over all other research. They will take months to initiate and may not even be live in time for June, let alone March.

Once we have those systems, with their regular reporting, in place, we should be seeking to actively combat that interference. It is likely that this would come after the powers came into force., and thus there would be a remit in place to justify them.

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

Yes, please see above. In addition, these investigations should not only apply to the local elections in June, but also to the vote on the Constitution in March.

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

Yes. My first concern relates to the seriousness of the research programme itself, and whether it will adhere to rigorous scientific principles and academic-level scholarship. The introduction repeatedly uses words such as 'broad', 'inclusive', 'diversity of thought', and 'debate.' None of these are concerning in and of themselves, after all, there is also reference to the aim 'to be informed by evidence', along with peer review, transparency and open publication.

However, there is a highlighted quote from a parapsychologist and writer: "The way to do research is to attack the facts at the point of greatest astonishment", Celia Green. Parapsychology is generally defined as "the study of alleged psychic phenomena (extrasensory perception, telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis (also called telekinesis), and psychometry) and other paranormal claims, for example, those related to near-death experiences, synchronicity, apparitional experiences, etc." The reference is from wikipedia - an appropriate source, given that the subject is itself so nebulous and ill-defined. Parapsychology is, by definition, not scientific, and can never be reconciled with a serious research programme. In this context, I am concerned that the inclusion of such a reference could mean that there is a wider issue with regard to the seriousness of the research programme being described.

Allowing for debate, inclusion, and diversity does not mean that alternatives to serious, academic-quality scholarship and scientific research can be tolerated.

Secondly, democracy is in crisis internationally - not because it is not evolving but because it is actively under attack. For instance, see the recent warnings issued by the US State Department to Ireland about alleged Russian targeting of upcoming elections, and the kinds of technological tools they may use:

1st January 2024: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorials/2024/01/01/the-irish-times-view-on-the-year-of-elections-ahead-constant-vigilance-will-be-required/>

6th November 2023: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/politics/arid-41263588.html>

6th November 2023: <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/11/06/washington-warns-irish-government-of-potential-russian-election-interference/>

It is my opinion that the seriousness of this threat is not reflected in the draft programme. I would have hoped to see that investigations to detect, measure and monitor external interference would be prioritised over all other research priorities. Once we have those systems, with their regular reporting, in place, we should be seeking to actively combat that interference - conducting research into the most effective ways of doing so.

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I am responding as an Individual