



VotingRights.ie

www.VotingRights.ie

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To: Electoral Commission

Fr: Voting Rights.ie

Re: Suggested Research Projects

Ireland has spent the last decade coming to terms with its past during the Decade of Centennials. The timing seems right to chart a new course for the 21st century which must include protecting its democracy by expanding voting rights. Given the increasing rise of autocracy in Europe and around the world, we believe that the expansion of the franchise is one sure way to make Ireland's democracy safer in these challenging times.

We understand that the Commission has already included the extension of postal voting to all citizens and residency and voting as part of its research agenda. We suggest the Commission should also research the following:

1. What specific steps can be taken to adjust or remove the current time limit for those temporarily abroad (the 18-month rule) established over sixty years ago. The 2018 Citizen Assembly "The Manner in which Referenda are Held" recommended an expansion of the limit to five years, While we believe all time limits should be removed, the current 18-month limit is particularly problematic in ignoring the reality that many Irish citizens live outside the state temporarily, including those on work visas and student programs. We note, however, that all time limits are outdated, impossible to enforce and violates the core E.U. principle of freedom of movement.
2. Ireland's electoral system is the most restrictive in Europe, denying citizens temporarily living outside the right to vote in local, national or E.U. Parliamentary elections;we believe this violates the EU's core principle of freedom of movement. Ireland cannot claim that it is at the very heart of the European experience and violate this core principle.

3. Clarify the specific Constitutional meaning of ordinary or habitual residence, noting that the State uses a different metric for purposes of taxation and social welfare eligibility
4. What concrete steps can be taken to expand postal voting ? Will the government remove restrictions on Seanad voting and allow all citizens to vote for Seanad candidates given the Manning Report and the recent decision by the Supreme Court?
5. What steps will be taken to allow voters to vote in polling stations other than their local polling station given that many voters work away from their hometowns?
6. How can Ireland enhance its electoral system to increase the opportunity of all citizens to vote including early voting and automatic voter registration. Early voting and postal voting is particularly helpful to the elderly and those with disabilities Many states in the United States have a well established record of early voting and postal voting which has increased turnout
7. What can be done to make weekend voting the norm for general elections which would increase voter participation and make it easier for citizens living outside the state to return home to vote?
8. There is an urgent need for an education campaign to counter the “otherness” that defines how many Irish citizens look at their fellow citizens in Northern Ireland and living outside the state.

According to the most recent IDEA global democracy report (January, 2021) a total of 125 states and territories allow people living abroad to participate in legislative elections, 88 allow participation in presidential elections and 73 countries and territories allow citizens overseas to participate in referendums. Ireland is not one of them. In sharp contrast, in the recent Polish election, over 600,000 Polish emigrants, including many living in Ireland, waited for hours in long queues to vote to save their democracy. Ireland is not immune to the growing threat of autocracy; the threat is likely to come from within, not an overseas citizen.

We believe that there is an unstated hierarchy in Irish political culture which defines Irish-born citizens living abroad or over the Border as second-class citizens. The current electoral system rigidly enforces this second-class status, with citizens who leave Ireland who do not return to Ireland within eighteen months, losing their right to vote on the day they depart.

The requirement that you must be on the island and on the right side of the island to vote is an outdated policy that demeans proud Irish citizens from Derry to Belfast. Nationalists in the North were abandoned for decades, yet one hundred years after the Partition there are no Northern Voices in the Seanad. Disenfranchising voters on the basis of residence is both exclusionary and extraordinary in this modern era of mobility when so many Irish citizens live abroad for a few years.

Ireland has always been a nation of emigrants and emigration has vastly changed. For many it's temporary, and those abroad are avid readers of Irish news sources and the vast range of modern technologies that let them know what is going on back in Ireland instantly. The hundreds of thousands of young people who left Ireland in recent years and those about to leave are an

immense source of creativity, energy and good ideas. The importance of the vote to recent emigrants was vividly demonstrated by the #HomeToVote movements for marriage equality and the repeal of the 8th amendment. .

The economic and social impact of Irish citizens living abroad has been and remains immense. Ireland would not be the prosperous nation that it is today without the sustained help of Irish citizens overseas using their soft power as well as their political power to come to Ireland's assistance time and time again, for well over 175 years from the Famine years to the GFA and most recently in helping to prevent a hard border as a result of Brexit.

The next decade will be momentous for Ireland including the possibility of preparing for a United Ireland. Taking up the challenge of expanding the franchise to create a modern democracy, suitable for the 21st century, is a precondition for these momentous times. We hope that you will consider our suggestions.

The Commission can learn more about our organization at www.votingrights.ie and also a link to a series of essays on the issue of voting rights <https://citizenshippapers.ie/> which amplifies our belief that citizens living just over the Border and overseas have demonstrated their loyalty to the nation again and again and should be granted the right to vote.

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