

RESEARCH PROGRAMME

2024-2026



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Chair's Foreword



The *Electoral Reform Act 2022* which established An Coimisiún vested it with a research function in regard to electoral policy and procedures, and an obligation to encourage participation by the public in the electoral and democratic processes of the State. The Draft Research Programme published by An Coimisiún last November invited submissions and observations on An Coimisiún's research projects to be conducted in furtherance of this function.

Over the course of that public consultation process, the depth and extent of engagement of the members of the public and of stakeholders who responded to the draft, and useful input from our Research Advisory Group, highlighted the importance of high-quality research and information. These submissions presented a diverse range of opinions on, and interest in, the Irish electoral and democratic system, and on the matters that can usefully be examined and improved.

I am grateful to the members of the public and organisations that responded. We hope that this lively engagement will continue through the research projects now presented in this report. The submissions largely supported our own planned approach, particularly the proposed five thematic strands.

In the foreword to the Draft Research Programme I observed that 'research, data and evidence will be the beating heart and guiding light of An Coimisiún's work.'¹ The comprehensive, innovative and evidence-based approach to the projects we will now undertake are intended to enhance and support all aspects of Ireland's electoral system and democracy, and will establish An Coimisiún as a reliable and trustworthy source of research for both Irish and international audiences.

In our first year we have developed Ireland's first longitudinal National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS)², and that research is available online now. As can be seen from this report, we propose to support research under a blue-sky/curiosity driven research. I am confident that this Research Programme lays the foundations for An Coimisiún to begin its important and timely work.

Ms. Justice Marie Baker,
Chairperson,
An Coimisiún Toghcháin.

1. Introduction

'...Research and analysis will help policy makers and civil society better understand what conditions lead to positive political and societal changes and perceptions of fairness, political efficacy and trust...'
(From consultation submission RS47)³

In November 2023, An Coimisiún Toghcháin published its first draft Research Programme for public consultation. This document set out the vision and values underpinning An Coimisiún's approach to its research and proposed five suggested thematic strands to structure the research programme. It also identified a long list of potential research areas and topics with a view to getting feedback from the public on what should be prioritised by An Coimisiún in its first Research Programme over the period 2024-2026.

Following consideration and analysis of the 62 public submissions received (which are also published along with a summary document) and consulting An Coimisiún Toghcháin's Research Advisory Group (see details at Appendix 1), An Coimisiún

Toghcháin has decided on its research priorities for 2024 and has also identified some indicative priorities for 2025 and 2026. As provided for in the *Electoral Reform Act 2022*, these will be reviewed on an annual basis in consultation with the Joint Oireachtas Committee, the Minister, the Research Advisory Group and other stakeholders.

Participants to the consultation process were generally supportive of An Coimisiún's research mandate, its research vision and values and the research strands previously published in the Consultation Document. These will be restated before the criteria used to identify the research priorities and the priorities themselves are described in Sections 5 and 6.

¹ An Coimisiún Toghcháin, the Electoral Commission 2023, Draft Research Programme 2024-2026. Available at <https://www.electoralcommission.ie/publications/research-publications/>
² Available at www.neds.ie

³ The submissions are published at www.electoralcommission.ie/research-submissions

2. Research Mandate

The *Electoral Reform Act 2022* mandates An Coimisiún ‘to commission or conduct research on electoral policy and procedures including on matters relating to the discharge of its functions and may arising from that research, make such recommendations to the Minister and the Government as it considers appropriate.’

It provides that An Coimisiún shall:

- prepare, annually, programmes specifying: ‘the subjects in relation to which it proposes to conduct research... and the objectives of such research; the manner in which such research shall be carried out; and the estimated cost of such research.’
- consult with the Joint Oireachtas Committee, the Minister and any other person, as the Commission considers appropriate in preparing its Research Programmes;
- arrange for these Research Programmes to be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas; and
- update on its Research Programme within 6 months of it being laid before the Houses and report on its research in its Annual Report.

As well as specifying an annual Research Programme for 2024, An Coimisiún has decided to follow a more strategic approach by identifying indicative research priorities for a three-year period. However, in keeping with the adaptive and flexible culture of An Coimisiún, the projects for the second and third years may be revised and adapted in light of changing circumstances, evolving best practice or the findings of emerging research.

An Coimisiún will submit a short progress update within 6 months to the Joint Oireachtas Committee as required under the *Electoral Reform Act 2022* and a more detailed research update as part of our Annual Report. We will at the same time ensure that the timelines and targets we set for completion of projects are framed to ensure high-quality, inclusive and rigorous research.



3. Vision and Values

An Coimisiún’s Strategy Statement sets out the following vision:

Box 1: An Coimisiún’s strategic vision

Ireland’s electoral process is trusted and valued as being fair, free and impartial. The people are informed, engaged and empowered, leading to the highest turnouts in electoral events. Through enhancing understanding and active participation in democracy An Coimisiún Toghcháin counteracts potentially negative impacts of misinformation and disinformation on the electoral and democratic process. Through its innovative programmes, An Coimisiún Toghcháin has fostered democratic oversight in Ireland, for the public good.

An Coimisiún was mindful of this vision in selecting its research priorities. An Coimisiún’s research will also be guided by the following principles, which are rooted in our core values:

• Independence and Impartiality:

The *Electoral Reform Act 2022* provides that An Coimisiún is independent in the performance of its functions. This is fundamental to ensuring trust and confidence that An Coimisiún is also impartial in all its activities and decisions and, in particular, will display political impartiality at all times. These values will underpin our approach to our research and any recommendations made arising from the research, which will be based on robust data and evidence.

• Inclusivity and Fairness:

Rooted in our core value of equity, An Coimisiún will strive to place inclusivity at the heart of our research. It is important that An Coimisiún’s research encompasses all sections of Irish society and the issues that face them in our

electoral system and wider democracy. There will be a particular focus on groups who have in the past been under-reached or marginalised from political and democratic processes. Public consultation and public surveys will be incorporated strategically in our research and An Coimisiún will also ensure that there is diversity in the researchers employed and commissioned to conduct research. Any commissioning or procuring processes will be fair and equitable.

• The Advancement of Scholarship and Debate:

Given the research functions set out in the *Electoral Reform Act 2022*, it is An Coimisiún’s goal to carry out world-class, innovative research that benefits not only the Irish electoral system, but electoral, political and democratic research more broadly. In selecting and prioritising research topics, An Coimisiún will consider a variety of areas of relevance in Ireland and further afield, with a view to becoming a leading source of high-quality research regarding electoral systems and democracy

including with a comparative focus. An Coimisiún will promote and disseminate its research widely including at all levels of the education system to promote discussion and debate on democracy and Ireland's electoral system.

• **Peer Review and Scrutiny:**

It is important that An Coimisiún's research be of the highest possible standard, so as best to serve the Irish people and their democracy. Independent and international peer review and expertise will be incorporated into our research processes to ensure that our work is of high-quality, reliable and in keeping with academic best practices. The development of robust peer review mechanisms and systems will be a priority for 2024. A research ethics policy will also be developed in line with best practice.

The delivery of our research functions will also be governed by the core public service principles of **transparency, accountability and value for money.**

We will be transparent about our research methodologies and how we conduct and commission research. Research projects will generally be published⁴ to allow the public, experts and interest groups to read our research, form views on the findings and participate in open debates on potential reforms or changes to improve and enhance Irish democracy.

An Coimisiún will be publicly accountable for its research and for ensuring it is conducted ethically and to the highest standards. We will ensure we carry out our research in a cost-effective manner at all times and focus on value for money in commissioning and procuring research, while ensuring that this is not at the expense of quality standards.

⁴ Exceptions to this will be very limited and informed by a public interest test and relevant Freedom of Information exemptions.



4. Thematic Strands

The Research Consultation Document proposed that the Research Programme be organised around five strands (detailed below).

Respondents to the consultation process were specifically asked for their views on these proposed strands and responses were overwhelmingly positive. This thematic approach was also endorsed by the Research Advisory Group. An Coimisiún therefore considers that there is a strong mandate for using the themes as the basis for structuring and planning the Research Programme for the next three years.

Box 2: Selected comments on the 5 strands from consultation respondents

- *'The proposed strands represent a good balance of research projects'* (RS01)
- *'We ...approve of the five proposed research strands'* (RS03)
- *'They seem fine and comprehensive'* (RS25)
- *'I think they are very good and should provide a good foundation...'* (RS36)



Strand A: Longitudinal survey research and data collection

Ireland has a substantial and well-regarded body of research on elections and electoral behaviour and many internationally respected electoral experts. However, it is an outlier in not having had to date a track record of consistent and appropriately resourced National Election Studies. These studies provide reliable and comprehensive data about its elections and political behaviour. Such studies have been in place in many other countries for well over 50 years.

To begin the development and collection of robust data to inform delivery of the full range of its functions, the centrepiece of Strand A will be the development of a National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS) for Ireland. This will incorporate elements of the traditional National Election Study model and, in particular, a rigorous

sampling methodology, but with a broader focus reflecting An Coimisiún's mandate and functions.

Given that An Coimisiún is a new body and wishes to track its progress and performance, it will also follow the practice of other Electoral Commissions, and supplement the NEDS data with polling of the electorate on a rolling basis. This polling will take place between elections, and not just during electoral periods. It will involve rigorous polling of representative samples of the public on their attitudes towards different aspects of elections and democracy. The latter will inform our work on an ongoing basis, in both election and non-election periods. There will be a particular focus on identifying factors that need to be reflected in developing strategies to increase turnout and political participation, with a view to informing An Coimisiún's initiatives in these areas.

This data will also inform the separate Post Electoral Event Reviews (PEERs) which An Coimisiún is required to prepare and publish after each electoral event, with particular attention to requirements to look at the overall accessibility of the voting process for groups of voters with disabilities, illnesses or literacy challenges. In addition, the NEDS will include questions that feature in other international election studies in order to facilitate comparative research on Ireland including in relation to voting motivations and behaviour. The data will be anonymised and open source so as to provide stakeholders, the public, the media and the political system with high-quality information about the state of our democracy.

Given that this Strand will provide data to help inform research under all the other thematic strands, An Coimisiún previously committed to progressing the NEDS immediately. Significant progress has already been made (see section 6.2.1 below).



Strand B: Electoral law, electoral systems and electoral infrastructure

The *Electoral Reform Act 2022* provides for An Coimisiún Toghcháin to make recommendations to the Minister and the Government on electoral policy and procedures arising from its work. There are also provisions for An Coimisiún to commission or conduct research in relation to the electoral register to inform its oversight role. This Strand, therefore, will focus on the constitutional, legal and institutional arrangements and infrastructure governing Ireland's electoral events, as well as identifying reforms which might be needed to enhance and promote Ireland's democracy.



Strand C: Integrity of electoral events

It is vital that Ireland's electoral events continue to be considered free and fair, and that there is trust in their integrity and security. Research under this Strand will support An Coimisiún in delivering comprehensive post electoral event reviews of the administration of Ireland's electoral events. It will also inform its strategy for delivering its legislative mandate (once commenced) to protect Ireland's democracy and electoral events from online electoral interference, disinformation, misinformation and cyber-attacks.



Strand D: Education, public engagement and inclusion

An Coimisiún has a new and very significant role in increasing and enhancing electoral participation in Ireland and improving the inclusivity of Ireland's democratic system. Informed by data gathered under Strand A, this Strand will focus on researching and then delivering best practice with regard to education on democracy, and discovering how our systems need to be improved to increase democratic participation and voter engagement across the population. There will also be a significant focus on research exploring how best to support and increase democratic and electoral engagement and participation by under-served, under-reached, and under-represented groups.



Strand E: Blue-sky/curiosity-driven research

An Coimisiún is a learning organisation and recognises that there is a major role for curiosity driven 'blue-sky' research. This is important in ensuring our research is positioned at the cutting edge of democratic innovation, and does not miss out on exploring potentially exciting and valuable research through an overly narrow thematic focus.



5.

Research Prioritisation Criteria

In developing this first Research Programme An Coimisiún was mindful that aspiring to, and achieving, research excellence requires a supporting scaffolding of appropriate systems, governance arrangements and infrastructure. Since An Coimisiún is a new organisation this must be developed in parallel with delivering the first research projects. Significant work needs to be done in identifying and building the infrastructure required including appropriate stakeholder engagement mechanisms, IT infrastructure, knowledge management systems, processes for commissioning and procuring research and staff recruitment and capacity building. Some of this work is underway, but there is more to be done.

Investing sufficient time, consideration and attention to these matters in the short term will ensure solid foundations for a well-functioning and effective research unit, and high-quality research in the longer term. This Research Programme, therefore, takes a phased realistic approach in terms of the quantity of projects which it is possible for a new research body to advance in its early years, without sacrificing excellence and academic rigour.

In evaluating various potential research topics with a view to prioritisation, the following criteria were developed (in consultation with the Research Advisory Group):

- 1. The topic is aligned with ensuring excellent and evidence-based delivery of An Coimisiún’s statutory functions (see Box 3 below).
- 2. The topic engenders high levels of stakeholder and public interest and engagement (see separate published summary of consultation process at www.electoralcommission.ie/research-programme for an indication of interest in particular topics).
- 3. The topic is aligned with achieving international best practice.
- 4. The topic is what could be classified as ‘a quick win or low hanging fruit,’ in other words it is of a scope or scale that it can be delivered relatively quickly, or with modest capacity/resource implications.

Box 3: An Coimisiún’s functions

An Coimisiún is responsible for a range of already existing electoral functions, including:

- Explaining the subject matter of referendums, promoting public awareness of referendums and encouraging the electorate to vote at referendums;
- Conducting reviews and making reports in relation to the constituencies for the election of members to the Dáil and the European Parliament;
- Making reports for the Minister in relation to local electoral boundaries; and
- The registration of political parties.

As well as its research role, An Coimisiún is also tasked with several other new electoral roles:

- Promoting public awareness of, and working to increase public participation in the State’s electoral and democratic processes through education and information programmes;
- Overseeing the Electoral Register, making recommendations and setting standards in relation to its maintenance and updating;
- The preparation of ex-post reports on the administration of electoral events;
- The regulation of online paid-for political advertising, ensuring transparency in respect of online political advertisements (this part of the Act has not yet commenced); and
- Investigation and monitoring of online disinformation, online misinformation and manipulative or inauthentic behaviour online during election campaign periods, as well as functions to prevent manipulative or inauthentic behaviours online (not yet commenced).⁵

⁵ The Government has signalled it intends to amend these Parts of the Act before they are commenced.

6. Research Priorities

6.1 Summary

Using the above criteria, An Coimisiún has identified a select group of priority projects for 2024 (Year 1). Significant progress has already been made with some, which are underway (see section 6.2.1 below). It is intended that the number of research projects will increase considerably in future years, once the initial establishment phase is completed, and a fully developed research infrastructure and ecosystem is in place.

Table 1: Research priorities 2024-2026

Commencing in 2024	2025	2026
Strand A: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design and commence National Election and Democracy Study (NEDS)	Strand A: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further develop and extend NEDS	Strand A: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further develop and extend NEDS
Strand B: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constituency Review research• Ballot paper address requirement• Postering• Review of 1997 Electoral Act	Strand B: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The extension of postal voting• Ballot paper design	Strand B: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review alternatives to bye-elections• Review of PRSTV as Ireland’s electoral system
Strand C: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mis and disinformation research• Post electoral event reviews to be completed for all electoral events in 2024	Strand C: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider extension of mis and disinformation research building on year 1 findings• Post electoral event reviews to be completed for all electoral events in 2025	Strand C: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Electronic voting/ counting• Post electoral event reviews to be completed for all electoral events in 2026
Strand D: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meta-analysis of research regarding under-reached and under-represented groups• Reducing the voting age	Strand D: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follow up projects on underreached/ underrepresented groups informed by meta-analysis	Strand D: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Residency and voting• Advance voting
Strand E: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design mechanism to identify and facilitate blue-sky research projects	Strand E: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Run pilot process to identify blue-sky projects and commence these	Strand E: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further blue-sky research projects

An Coimisiún also has an oversight role in relation to the electoral register which is separately provided for in legislation. Therefore, An Coimisiún may also over the period 2024-2026 commission or conduct research on the electoral register as provided under Section 69 of the *Electoral Reform Act 2022*.

6.2 Priorities for 2024

6.2.1 Strand A: NEDS

Progress to date

As the first step in the development of the NEDS study, a pilot study was commissioned on the referendums of 8 March 2024. Advised by the NEDS Management Board (for more information see Appendix 2), three surveys were commissioned. These were conducted by two independent polling companies – an online and a telephone survey in advance of the referendums, and a voters’ survey of a representative sample of just over 3,500 voters at 185 polling stations on polling day. Headline data from this research has already been published, reflecting An Coimisiún’s commitment to making its research publicly available. Reflecting international best practice, the raw data and code books are currently being made ready for publication under the supervision of the NEDS Management Board, and will be published once this process is completed.

The March surveys included questions to benchmark levels of awareness of, and trust in, An Coimisiún. Data was also collected in relation to voting experience (to feed into An Coimisiún’s first PEER), levels of political knowledge, sources of information and influences on turnout, which are already being used to inform An Coimisiún’s work in education and voter engagement.

A second study is currently in progress for the June elections, once again with the oversight of the NEDS Management Board. This consists of an online survey of 3,000 voters related to the Local and European Elections on 7 June, as well as a voters’ survey in Limerick specifically regarding the Limerick mayoral election. The surveys have been completed and, similar to March, the data will be published as soon as it is available.

Work is also underway to prepare for a study regarding the next General Election which will happen no later than March 2025, including procurement, finalisation of methodology and questionnaire development, with the support of the NEDS Management Board and the Research Advisory Group. The General Election Study will be the most extensive study to date, and will require detailed preparation, informed by the experience and learnings from the March and June studies.

NEDS is an ambitious longitudinal research project which requires a significant investment of time, and careful and considered oversight and management. Its establishment is a core research priority for An Coimisiún and it is envisaged it will evolve and develop over time, building on experience and international best practice.



6.2.2 Strand B

(i) Constituency Review

In its Report of the Constituency Review⁶ completed in August 2023, An Coimisiún identified three pieces of research to be conducted to inform future Reviews:

- **Representation** and the manner in which the overall number of TDs is determined in the context of the rising population, and relevant current constitutional and legal provisions.
- **Constituency magnitude:** A number of public submissions to the constituency review called for 6 seat constituencies, or a change to provisions which currently preclude this. While some submissions called for more 3 seat constituencies, the majority of those referencing the issue proposed more 5 seat constituencies. In the Constituency Review Report, An Coimisiún committed to prioritising research on constituency magnitude, including exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of permitting constituencies of larger than 5 seats.
- **Constituency Review methodology:** This was the first Constituency Review conducted by An Coimisiún. As a permanent standing body An Coimisiún is committed to conducting a review of the process to identify potential future enhancements, including to the consultation process and whether there is scope for the increased use of technology.

This research has been prioritised for commencement in 2024, as it is central to supporting and informing An Coimisiún’s performance of one of its key statutory functions. It was identified as a top priority by many respondents to the research

consultation process. The issue of constituency magnitude was of particular interest and highlighted by over a third of respondents. A number of political scientists and experts have also highlighted this as requiring renewed consideration.⁷

This research will involve a mixture of in-house research, stakeholder consultation and expert engagement. It will commence in 2024.

(ii) Ballot paper address requirements

In the context of increasing threats to the safety of politicians (reflected, for example, in the decision by the Ceann Comhairle and Cathaoirleach to establish a Taskforce on Safe Participation in Public Life, which reported on 15 May 2024), a number of respondents to the consultation process suggested that research be conducted on the requirement for electoral candidates to include their addresses on ballot papers.

For example, one respondent stated *‘Faced with an increasingly volatile political culture and threats of violence against candidates, removing this requirement may be necessary to ensure the personal safety of candidates and their families’ (RS45).*

As this is a relatively discrete and focussed topic, An Coimisiún considers that this is a topic which can be completed in-house with a view to preparing a research brief/discussion document for publication before the end of 2024.

Broader issues around ballot paper design were also highlighted in a number of submissions, and this will be a priority research area for 2025 (see section 6.3 below).

⁶ Available at www.electoralcommission.ie/constituency-reviews/

⁷ See for example <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2023/09/06/the-cube-root-rule-that-determines-the-number-of-tds-ireland-should-have/>



(iii) Postering

Election posters have been variously described as ‘an eyesore and bordering on vandalism’⁸ or as ‘a necessary tool for drawing citizens into the conversation and turning them out to vote.’⁹ Others have suggested they ‘are unsightly, can lead to litter... and are a distraction to motorists.’¹⁰ One of the research submissions further noted that they can serve as ‘a straightforward visual reminder of the identity of candidates for certain people who may have an intellectual or learning disability’ (RS40) indicating that as well as generating significant debate and interest, this topic is relevant to a number of An Coimisiún’s functions.

As previously mentioned, the *Electoral Reform Act 2022* provides for An Coimisiún to consult with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in preparing its Research Programmes. The issue of election postering has been highlighted by the Minister and the Minister of State for Electoral Reform, as one of their key research priorities.

Research on postering will therefore be commenced in 2024. This will include a public consultation process.

(iv) Review of 1997 Electoral Act

There has been a long standing commitment from Government to review the 1997 Electoral Act. Particular concerns have been raised about the definition of ‘political purposes’ in the Act, as it applies to rules around accepting donations. The need for a review of the Act was raised in a number of the research submissions as well as by members of the Research Advisory Group.

This is a substantive piece of research and will begin in 2024.



6.2.3 Strand C:

(i) Mis and disinformation research

Concerns over the potential for false and misleading information to compromise the integrity of and trust in electoral processes and democracy have been highlighted in recent years. This has been at both national and international level including by the EU, OECD and International IDEA as well as in Ireland by EDMO Ireland and a range of other experts and stakeholders.

This was also an area which received significant attention in the research submissions and in discussions and input from the Research Advisory Group.

Box 4: Research submission quotes on mis and disinformation

- ‘When it comes to protecting Ireland’s democracy and electoral events, combating online electoral interference is of the utmost importance.’ (RS03)
- ‘I do not believe it is viable to wait until parts 4 and 5 have commenced to conduct research into online political ads and other digital threats: this would waste valuable learning opportunities in 2024.’ (RS46)
- ‘There is no reason to wait to conduct investigations into the scale of (external interference)...’ (RS19)

The *Electoral Reform Act 2022* provides An Coimisiún Toghcháin with powers relating to the regulation of online political advertising and the monitoring and investigation of online disinformation during election campaign periods. However, these parts of the Act have not yet come into force, and the Government has signalled its intention to make amendments prior to their commencement, in order to reflect in particular recent EU legislative developments.

An Coimisiún has engaged in initial awareness raising in relation to disinformation and online threats to democracy and elections through a social media campaign. It also recently developed a voluntary framework for technology companies, parties and candidates on ‘Online Electoral Process information, Political Advertising and Deceptive AI Content’ in advance of the June elections.¹¹ It is clear that further initiatives and action are required to mitigate these risks to electoral integrity and these must be evidence-based.

An Coimisiún will therefore launch a research call in 2024 for projects in this area with a view to supporting or co-funding projects with the most potential to inform An Coimisiún’s future actions. The overall aim will be to gather more evidence about mis and disinformation, and other forms of online electoral interference, as well as their prevalence, and the impacts on democracy. It will also examine tools to address this, both at a systemic and individual level.

(ii) Post Electoral Event Review

Post Electoral Event reviews (PEERs) on the administration of the electoral events in March and June 2024 will be completed in-house by An Coimisiún staff. These will be based on fact-finding visits by An Coimisiún staff and members to a selected set of polling stations selected according to pre-defined criteria. NEDS data and stakeholder engagement will also be used to inform the PEER reports.

⁸ <https://www.newstalk.com/news/its-bordering-on-vandalism-do-we-need-election-posters-1723410>
⁹ <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0218/116223-election-posters-ban-voter-turnout/>
¹⁰ <https://www.anglocelt.ie/2016/02/11/opinion-election-posters-are-outdated-and-should-be-outlawed/>

¹¹ <https://www.electoralcommission.ie/media-release/an-coimisiun-toghchain-publishes-framework-on-online-electoral-process-information-political-advertising-and-deceptive-ai-content-in-advance-of-june-elections/>

The PEER report for the March referendums is currently being finalised and will be published by 8 September. This is based on visits to close to 100 polling stations in every county with a particular focus on accessibility utilising Census 2022 statistics to identify areas with high numbers of carers and persons declaring a disability.

A PEER was also conducted for the June elections, reflecting and building on learning from the March experience. Once again, Electoral Commission members and staff visited 100 polling stations covering every county as well as an offshore island. In line with our interest in under-reached and under-represented groups, the criteria for selection of polling stations included those located in areas with a high number of potential voters from the travelling community, as well as areas with a high number of voters entitled to vote in Local or European elections only, as well as polling stations deemed inaccessible. The report from the June PEER is currently being prepared and will be published within 6 months.

6.2.4 Strand D

(i) Meta-analysis

An Coimisiún has a new and very significant role in increasing and enhancing electoral participation in Ireland, and improving the inclusivity of Ireland's democratic system. To inform this work, research is required to benchmark existing levels of participation and engagement with democracy and politics in Ireland, including identifying barriers and enablers. This will help establish how our systems need to be improved to increase democratic participation and voter engagement across the population, as well as identifying what new initiatives are needed. Some initial benchmarking data to inform this work is already being collected as part of the NEDS study.

There are also a number of under-reached and/or underrepresented groups which have lower levels of political engagement, voting and also participation as candidates in elections. These include younger people, migrants, minority ethnic groups, women, prisoners, homeless people, members of the Travelling Community, people with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQI+ community.¹² Carers are another cohort which may face barriers to political and electoral participation. The composition of the Research Advisory Group was designed to reflect many of these voices to ensure that the Research Programme and its development reflects a diverse range of perspectives. Findings and learning through the ongoing and structured engagement with a variety of underrepresented and under-reached groups by the voter education and engagement team in An Coimisiún will also feed into the Research Programme.

Democratic and electoral participation was the most referenced theme in submissions to the research consultation. Many highlighted the importance of prioritising research with a view to increasing diversity in political engagement and participation, including in terms of voting and running for election.

In discussing the research submissions and research priorities, the Research Advisory Group noted at its first meeting that the large scale sampling models involved in the NEDS are unlikely to give the insights required about under-reached and underrepresented groups. They suggested more detailed, nuanced and targeted research will be required. RAG members also highlighted the existence of a number of existing research projects, reports and data-sets regarding participation by different under-reached or under-represented groups, some also reflecting intersectionality themes.

The Research Advisory Group therefore proposed that the most appropriate first step in advancing research in this area would take the form of a literature survey to identify and draw together existing available research. This would take the form of a meta-analysis summarising existing research and data across a range of groups. It would identify any baselines which have been established regarding the political and democratic participation of the different groups, and the tools and strategies which may already have been identified or actioned. In addition, common strategies may be identified to increase participation across a number of these groups as well as ascertaining instances where bespoke and targeted solutions might be needed. There is likely to be potential for partnering with other organisations in this area which could be explored.

This meta-analysis is an important foundation stone for advancing research under Strand D, as well as an important complement to the NEDS study. It has, therefore, been identified as a priority project, and will be advanced through externally commissioned research in 2024.



¹² Very informative research submissions were received from or on behalf of many groups representing these individuals or groups.

(ii) Reducing the voting age

The minimum voting age in Ireland of 18 years has been an issue of much discussion and debate in political circles, and throughout the international literature for many decades. A number of other countries have reduced the voting age to 16 or 17 for at least certain types of elections (including Austria, Scotland, Malta and Germany).

This issue received significant interest in the consultation process, being the third most referenced topic, with some submissions strongly in favour of reducing the voting age, and others equally strongly opposed.

Box 5: Selected comments from submissions regarding voting age reduction

- *‘Voting at 16 should be examined in the context of Ireland’s obligations under the Convention on the rights of the Child.’ (RS32)*
- *‘Addition of new age cohorts to the electoral process would have significant impact and the decision making abilities of such cohorts must be well understood.’ (RS12)*
- *‘I don’t agree with lowering the voting age. This is based on my own maturity at 16 (and even 18).’ (RS04)*
- *‘Specifically extending the franchise to young people aged 16 and 17 in Ireland is of utmost importance and is long overdue decisive action.’ (RS57)*

Reducing the voting age is a potentially transformative decision and dependent on its outcome, research in this area could give rise to a referendum. It is important therefore that this research is comprehensive and balanced, drawing from international experience, but also reflective of the views of a broad range of experts,

stakeholders and the public, and cognisant of the distinctive qualities of Ireland’s democracy and electoral system. The topic of whether to reduce the voting age will therefore be a research priority for An Coimisiún that will be commenced in 2024. This will include an extensive public consultation process.

6.2. 5 Strand E:

(i) Blue-sky research

This strand was the subject of particular interest and support from respondents to the consultation process as well as the Research Advisory Group.

Strand E must be designed carefully to ensure that the projects selected add maximum value to the work of An Coimisiún, and are both innovative and inclusive. Work will commence on the design of a mechanism to identify and deliver blue-sky research in 2024 with a view to piloting this approach in 2025.

Box 6: Selected comments on the ‘blue-sky’ strand

- *‘I think the addition of a blue-sky strand is an excellent idea.’ (RS37)*
- *‘I...welcome the emphasis on... curiosity driven/ blue sky research which acknowledges the realities of an ever changing landscape around democracy and voting.’ (RS46)*
- *‘I fully support the inclusion of the blue-sky/curiosity driven research strand. This will enable researchers to pursue a diversity of projects related to democratic participation in Ireland.’ (RS45)*



6.3 Priorities for 2025

6.3. 1 Strand B:

(i) Ballot paper design

Apart from the issue of addresses on ballot papers which will be researched in 2024, a number of other issues regarding ballot paper design were raised in the consultation process (see Box 7 below). The relative clarity in layout and presentation of ballot papers can, for example, contribute to a reduction in spoilt ballot papers.

Furthermore, the accessibility of ballot papers for voters with disabilities is relevant to An Coimisiún’s remit in terms of post electoral event reviews, as well as increasing voter participation. Some of the submissions also suggested that there are fairer ways of ordering candidates on ballot papers.

Box 7: Selected comments from submissions regarding ballot paper design

- *‘This might be the time to reconsider changing the design of our ballot papers... some years ago the Convention on the Constitution proposed the removal of alphabetical voting... An easier option might be to consider a new ballot paper design such as used in Australia and Malta.’ (RS05)*
- *‘Changes to the ranking of the candidates on the ballot paper should be considered. Currently the ranking ...is in alphabetical order but this privileges candidate with surnames beginning in ABC etc. The use of random ranking... could produce more fair and equitable outcomes.’ (RS45)*
- *‘Redesign of ballot paper: there could at least be experiments with this. In Australia the ballot has been altered to place a greater emphasis on party.’ (RS09)*

Reflecting the relevance of this topic to a number of An Coimisiún’s functions, and the interest it received in submissions as well as amongst members of the Research Advisory Group, a broader review of ballot paper design will be commissioned and conducted in 2025.

6.3.2: Strand C

Post Electoral Event Reviews will be conducted for all electoral events in 2025 and further research on disinformation and online threats to electoral integrity will be considered depending on the progress, experience and outcomes of the research on this topic in 2024.



6.3.3 Strand D

(i) Extension of postal voting

Provisions for postal voting are much more limited in Ireland than for many other countries and apply in quite a narrow set of circumstances (see box 8 below).

Box 8: Postal voting criteria

- An Irish diplomat posted abroad, or their spouse or civil partner who is living abroad with them.
- A member of the Garda Síochána.
- A full-time member of the Defence Forces.
- Having a physical illness or disability.
- Students studying full-time at an educational institution in Ireland, which is away from the home address where you are registered.
- An inability to vote at your local polling station because of your occupation, service or employment.
- You are unable to vote at your polling station because you are in prison as a result of an order of a court.

This is an area where Ireland seems to be an outlier in terms of international best practice. Increasing eligibility for postal voting is seen by many as a potential tool to increase voter participation including by some respondents to the consultation process. However, as the EU Commission, for example, notes in its ‘Communication on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament,’ there are also security and electoral integrity implications which need to be taken into account in considering the extension of postal voting and other related innovations.¹³

Reflecting these considerations, research on the potential for the expansion of postal voting, its advantages and disadvantages and options in this regard will be commenced in 2025.

6.4 Priorities for 2026

Given their likely scale and scope, it is very likely that some of the research projects commenced in 2025 will continue into 2026. The potential for replacement of bye-election, and the extension of the franchise, will be prioritised for 2026 (both highlighted in the research submissions) as well as the continued development of the NEDS and a second round of blue-sky research projects. The conducting of PEERS will continue. Other possible research projects mentioned in the consultation process such as electronic counting and/ or voting, the introduction of advance voting, and a review of the electoral system (which could cover both Oireachtas and European Parliament elections) will also be considered for 2026.

¹³ See for example point 5. COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2023/2829 of 12 December 2023 on inclusive and resilient electoral processes in the Union and enhancing the European nature and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202302829

7. Development of Research Infrastructure and Capacity

In preparing this Research Programme we engaged with other similar public bodies involved in research. This highlighted that there is an extensive ecosystem and range of infrastructure required to deliver a high-quality, rigorous and inclusive research programme. These include appropriate knowledge and data management systems, governance models, IT infrastructure, peer review mechanisms, a research ethics policy, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, publication and citation conventions and rules and recruiting staff and researchers with relevant qualifications and experience. Consideration must

also be given to the best mechanisms to provide opportunities to early stage researchers and students, peer researchers in under-represented groups, as well as how schemes will ensure diversity and representation.

These are all matters to be considered and advanced in parallel with the early research projects. As these building blocks are developed, the number of research projects can then incrementally increase.

8. Budget and Resources

A budget of close to €1m has been allocated to research in 2024. This budget provides for the delivery of the priority projects for 2024. This will include expenditure on the research carried out by polling companies at each of the electoral events, the cleaning of the data for publication, any commissioned

research papers and costs associated with consultations, costs associated with research infrastructure and any administrative costs connected with stakeholder consultation, the Research Advisory Group and the National Election and Democracy Study Management Board meetings.

9. Conclusion

An Coimisiún is delighted to present what it believes is an exciting, ambitious and balanced programme of research. It would like to express thanks to all those who made a submission to the consultation process and assure them that each submission was carefully read and considered.

We will conclude as we started by quoting one of these submissions received:

***'Ireland is a well-established democracy that has held free and fair elections since its independence in 1922.... The Irish electoral system fosters pluralism, representativeness, and political stability by allowing voters to express their preferences among multiple candidates and parties. Additionally, the system has control and transparency mechanisms that ensure the integrity of the electoral processes.'** (RS54)*

Whilst noting Ireland's status as one of the world's oldest continuous democracies, An Coimisiún does not take this for granted. There are new and emerging risks to our democracy and elections that must be recognised as well as changes, innovation and improvements that must be explored.

An Coimisiún believes that this Research Programme will help ensure its actions and recommendations for reform are evidence-based and reflective of the values, diversity and perspectives of the Irish public.

We look forward to reporting to you on its progress.



Appendix 1: Research Advisory Group

On 23 February 2024, An Coimisiún Toghcháin announced the membership of its Research Advisory Group. This diverse and expert group supports An Coimisiún in delivering its ambitious programme of research.

As well as providing for a number of stakeholder representatives and an international member, An Coimisiún invited expressions of interest in filling four academic/expert positions on the Research Advisory Group.

The full membership of the Group is as follows:

- Professor Emerita Caroline Fennell, Professor Emerita of Law, University College Cork, member of An Coimisiún Toghcháin (Chair)
- Dr Nuala Connolly, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
- Dr Pauline Cullen, Associate Professor of Sociology and Politics in the Department of Sociology at Maynooth University
- Professor Kate Dommett, Professor of Digital Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield
- Professor David Farrell, Professor of Politics in the School of Politics and International Relations at University College Dublin
- Professor David Kenny, Professor in Law at Trinity College Dublin
- Brian Killoran, CEO Immigrant Council of Ireland
- Adam Lambe, Youth Representative
- Dr. Patricia McCarthy, Sociologist & Disability Advocate, Trinity College Dublin
- Orla O'Connor, Director, National Women's Council
- Dr. Brigid Quilligan, Traveller Activist
- Dr Paul Redmond, Economic and Social Research Institute
- Niklas Wilhelmsson, Department for Democracy & Public Law, Ministry of Justice, Finland

Appendix 2: NEDS Management Board

This National Election and Democracy Study project is being overseen and managed by a Management Board.

This Board is composed of a team of leading electoral experts and academics selected through an application process.

The members of the Board are as follows:

- Dr. Rory Costello, Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick
- Dr. Johan A. Dornschneider-Elkink, School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin
- Professor Georg Lutz, Director Fors (Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences), University of Lausanne.
- Professor Gail McElroy, Department of Political Science, Trinity College Dublin
- Dr. Theresa Reidy, Department of Government and Politics, University College Cork
- Professor Jane Suiter, School of Communications, Dublin City University

The Board is chaired by Dr. Mary-Clare O'Sullivan, Head of Research, An Coimisiún Toghcháin.

