

Note of Research Advisory Group meeting

11:00 – 13:00, Friday 23rd March 2025

Present:

Prof. Emerita Caroline Fennell (Chair), Dr. Pauline Cullen, Prof. David Farrell, Prof. David Kenny, Brian Killoran (Online), Adam Lambe, Orla O'Connor, Dr. Paul Redmond (Online), Niklas Wilhelmsson (Online).

Secretariat

Dr. Mary-Clare O'Sullivan, Dr. Catherine Lynch, Dr. Adam Whittle, Hugh Burgess, Ciara O'Riordan, Anthony Trindle.

Apologies:

Prof. Kate Dommett, Dr. Iris Elliot, Dr. Patricia McCarthy, Dr. Brigid Quilligan.

1. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising

The minutes of the previous meeting on Monday, 9th December 2024 were agreed without amendment.

The Chair provided the following update to members under matters arising:

- The Electoral Commission had noted the Research Ethics and Integrity policy at its meeting of 13th February. It was circulated to RAG members subsequently for their records.
- The General Research call for blue skies research will be advanced later in the year reflecting the sequencing of other priorities and governance and capacity considerations.
- Following the discussion of capacity issues of the team at the last meeting and reflecting the RAG view that increased staff resources should be considered, various channels to recruit additional staff and researchers were being progressed.
- Constitutional/legal advice: regarding research where constitutional change might be required it has been decided in light of Electoral Commission's referendum information function, that any commissioned or internal research should only ask for identification and analysis of options or potentially evidence related to particular options, rather than recommendations or conclusions. This is relevant to work being undertaken to advance 'reducing the voting age' research.

2. Conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest were declared. The Chair informed the meeting that a potential partnership with Taighde Éireann on one if its research calls was being explored, but that further detail would not be provided to RAG in order to avoid any future potential or perceived conflict for any members.

3(i) Ballot paper address

A draft of the ballot paper address research paper had been circulated for discussion and was introduced by Dr. Catherine Lynch, the lead researcher. The paper included some questions to guide the discussion. Members generally welcomed the progress on the research paper and made a number of suggestions/ comments, both with regard to the approach to the research and the recommendations made:

- There was general support for the approach including the principles identified in the paper, but it was suggested there would be merit in simplifying the language where possible.
- The wording related to the issue of violence, intimidation and threats against candidates needed to be strengthened.
- The paper should also note the differing impacts and situations of candidates depending on their backgrounds and personal situations. For example, certain groups (e.g. women, migrants) are more subject to threats, intimidation and violence and others may also have more limited options in terms of address. The situation of potential candidates experiencing homelessness would also need to be reflected in any potential reforms. It was also suggested that there might also be different perspectives within groups on this for example some candidates from a migrant background might wish to include an address on the ballot paper to demonstrate their local links while for others, safety and security concerns might dominate.
- It was noted that there are different international practices in this regard. For example, in Finland the ballot paper lists the candidate and their occupation only. The UK experience of reform in this area was also noted.
- There was some discussion of the recommendations with different views being expressed. These included the suggestion that it would be preferable to limit the address option to the agreed format of the Local Electoral Area (LEA) only so that everyone would be operating on a level playing field. This would avoid those who did not wish to provide their full

address due to fears of threats and violence being at a disadvantage compared with those who were comfortable providing a full address. Others considered it was not appropriate to preclude those who wished to provide their full address from doing so. It was also questioned whether the ballot paper is the appropriate means of communicating local links and it was suggested there were other potential channels for this such as campaign material and leaflets.

It was agreed the commentary would be considered in developing future drafts of the paper to go to the Electoral Commission.

3(ii) Meta-analysis

A substantive paper had been circulated and discussed at the previous meeting in December. A paper which summarised the following progress had been circulated:

- A short literature review had been undertaken to identify the factors found to explain turnout at elections in Ireland. This signalled the importance of ‘socio-economic’ and ‘friends and neighbours variables’ and the paper proposes that the analysis of turnout by the groups identified should reflect this.
- The literature review also confirmed that there is a gap in empirical information on turnout patterns at Irish elections and that this would be addressed in a follow-on project summarised in the update paper.
- The review to date also shows a disparity in data availability across the different identified groups. It has been possible to prepare detailed working papers on some groups (disability and youth) which are currently being considered and refined internally. They will feed into a single paper as agreed at the last meeting, but there may also be merit in publishing some discrete papers on groups under this strand where the data allows.
- The possibility of specific research to explore voting and political engagement patterns of the traveller community and people experiencing homelessness will be explored further as data on these groups was found to be particularly limited.

The meeting noted the progress made, generally endorsed the approach outlined and made the following comments/ suggestions:

- While it is the term used in the Research Strategy the direction of this research has moved from a meta-analysis to more of a systematic review and future iterations of this research should reflect this.
- There needs to be further consideration of how an intersectional methodology can be reflected in the research, while at the same time allowing for sufficient conclusions and potential policy actions regarding the particular socio-economic variables identified in the Research Programme. It was suggested that NGO's and other advocacy organisations could be a source of additional data and that there can be valuable insights from qualitative, intersectional data even where it relates to a small sample size as it can give rich detailed information on the experience of particular cohorts. Specifically on political participation from the migrant community it was noted that the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) research primarily centres on candidacy and employs multiple methods of engagement including in-depth interviews and questionnaires.
- From an international perspective it was noted that, for example, research on migrant political participation in Finland is supplemented by indicators of social and economic integration as these are often correlated with political participation. This interdisciplinary framework is embedded in Finland's approach to data indicators and statistics.

4(i) Research Programme

The meeting was updated as follows:

- NEDS: Data collection for the General Election NEDS was completed on schedule at the end of February. The approach taken was random probabilistic sample using Pobal data with survey administered face to face. There is also a data boost with the same survey administered to an online panel. The data is currently being coded and analysed and will be launched at an event in Dublin on 22 May to which all the RAG will be invited. Views will also be sought at that event on the approach to the Presidential election NEDS and the NEDS project longer term.

- Postering: An Coimisiún published an RFQ for external researchers to conduct this research in November 2024. After evaluation by a panel, including a representative from the EPA, the contract was awarded to a research team from Dublin City University. As previously agreed by the Research Advisory Group, peer review is being delivered through an Advisory Committee including an international member. The Committee held its inaugural meeting in-person with the researchers on 3 March and had a positive discussion. A second in-person meeting is planned for the mid-point of the project. A public consultation on the topic went live the previous day and it was agreed that a link would be sent to all members. The project will be completed within a year.
- Research Partnerships: A paper was circulated explaining that there is ongoing engagement with Research Ireland regarding participation on 3 of its schemes- no detail was provided on one of these as noted under Agenda Item 2. The others are the Public Sector Fellowships and the Enterprise Partnership Scheme (Postdoctoral). Consideration is being given to the suitability of these schemes in terms of their timing, timescale for delivery and their scope. The Group will be kept updated on developments as appropriate. In addition, An Coimisiún is partnering with the CSO to include some questions in the OECD Public Trust Survey.

5. Education & public engagement strategy update

- Sarah Keaveney from the Commissions' Education and Public Engagement team made a short presentation to members on the public consultation held on the Electoral Commission's Education and Public Engagement Strategy which has just been completed.
- It was noted that the project is not being driven from the research unit but the research will feed into and be informed by the work on the Strategy.

6. AOB

- It was proposed that the Group might next meet in person in the afternoon of Wednesday 10 September and that they would be invited to participate in the May NEDS event.

- Consideration would be given as to whether a short online meeting was needed before September depending on developments with the research pipeline.