

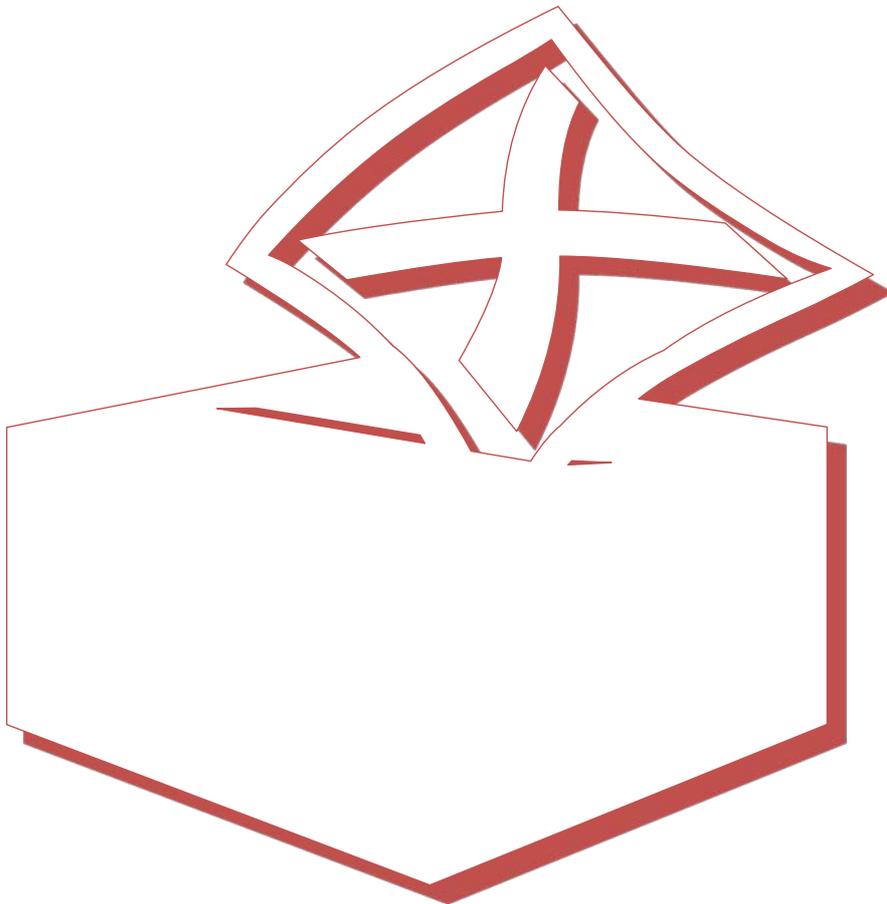


Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Voter Registration Reform

June 2015

Position Paper



A Chara,

The Union of Students in Ireland was a key driver of youth voter registration prior to the marriage equality referendum. USI was the main organisation registering young people to vote and we conducted a large-scale direct voter registration drive (where we sent off 27,633 forms directly to local and city councils). We also handed out tens of thousands of forms to students via our local students' unions. Throughout this campaign, we learned that there are many inconsistencies with the voter registration system in Ireland and much room for improvement.

Young voters formed the majority of those who registered on supplemental register and polling stations were noting unprecedented numbers of young people voting on May 22nd. It's important that we continue to engage these voters and improving the system will make it easier for persons who wish to be included in the register as well as making it easier for organisations like USI to register students to vote.

Voter registration and enfranchisement is an area concerning all political parties and public representatives and we urge you to raise this issue within your party or group.

We look forward to working with you on this issue.

Le meas,

Laura Harmon
USI President 2014/2015

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Introduction

USI is the national representative body for third-level students on this island. We represent over 300,000 students across the island of Ireland and advocate on their behalf.

In the run up to the recent marriage equality referendum, USI directly registered nearly 28,000 students to vote. Ten of thousands of additional forms were handed out by students' unions. During this campaign and previous voter registration campaigns on campuses across Ireland, we have noticed some inadequacies with the way in which new voters can be registered. Below we have outlined our proposals to improve voter registration.



Checktheregister.ie

The Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government oversees checktheregister.ie, a website where potential voters can check their registration status.

USI has noticed that new entrants to the register can be considerably slow to update – the register is not updated in a sufficiently timely manner to give comfort to a registrant on the supplemental register that they are registered. In the run-up to the referendum on marriage equality, this led to some significant anxiety on the part of would-be voters.

Recommendations

- USI acknowledges the enormous body of work undertaken by local authorities to process applications in a tight timeframe. However, we notice that the timeframe in which a local authority updates its own individual register is inconsistent and their proficiency in updating this varies.
- USI recommends that checktheregister.ie be made largely the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government rather than a decentralised system in which checktheregister.ie simply redirects the user to their own local authority's website.

Online Voter Registration Facility

At the moment, those who wish to be registered to vote must apply by printed form and send the form to the local authority. This practice, while commonplace in many

countries, is becoming outdated. The United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland¹) and some twenty US States have each developed an online registration system - and this group is ever-growing. ²

A report by the Joint Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government titled 'The Future of the Electoral Register in Ireland and Related Matters' (April 2008) highlighted the need for this facility. ³ It referenced Northern Ireland which abandoned the household registration system at the time of introduction of the UK's *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013*. It also references PPS numbers as an ideal measure to individually identify voters (e.g. those with the same name from the same town) which will combat fraud. For example, voter registration applicants in Canada can register by providing "the number from their driver's license or provincial ID card to confirm their identity" as a unique identifier. ⁴

Recommendations

- USI believes that if the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government were to invest in such a facility, it would significantly ease accessibility for many wishing to register to vote.
- The link to the issued PPS number, assuming sharing of data between government departments, could go some way to obviating a risk of fraudulent registration.
- The report 'The Future of the Electoral Register in Ireland and Related Matters' also recommends that this facility be done by a 'rolling' or continuous register rather than periodic registration windows used currently. This has been successful in the UK.

Ministerial Guidelines and Voter Registration Promotion

During voter registration campaigns run by USI and local students' unions, we have observed significant and troubling inconsistencies in how local authorities process voter registration forms. For example, some city and country councils would not accept forms in bulk and other would accept forms in bulk. While there may be good reason for this, USI found there was a lot of inconsistency between what different

¹ The exclusion of Northern Ireland from the new UK online system but its engagement in individual registration, stems from concerns about consistent and persistent electoral fraud in Northern Ireland, addressed in the Electoral Fraud Act 2002..

² U.K. facility can be viewed at: <https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>

³ Joint Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. 'The Future of the Electoral Register in Ireland and Related Matters' (April 2008). Available at: http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/committees30thdail/j-envherlocgov/reports_2008/22042008-1.doc

⁴ Information on Canadian voter registration is available on this specific government website: http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=vot&dir=faq&document=fagreg&lang=e - a6_3

council requested, and that, as a result, it is easier to be registered in some constituencies than others.

USI sees that promotion of key dates and information on voter registration to be the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government, Referendum/Electoral Commission and relevant Local Authorities. While efforts have been made by them to promote these in the run-up to every polling day in recent memory, USI does believe that these relevant bodies could be doing more.



Many of those wishing to get registered to vote that we met were confused about the process overall e.g. that there were deadlines, if/how they could register for a postal vote, what address they should register from (college or home addresses) etc.

USI has also seen inconsistent processing features of each local authority. For example, on the RFA1 form, it requests the applicant enter details for each member of the household eligible to vote. If the applicant only enters their own details, some local authorities have been known to remove other eligible voters in the household from the register.

We have also seen that local authorities have interpreted legislation in variable fashions i.e. in the Electoral Act 1992, it provides that a persons inclusion to the supplementary register must be stamped and verified by “the local garda station”. However, we have seen local authorities demand that the form be stamped by garda stations local to them as opposed to local to the person. Members of An Garda Síochána also communicated this confusion to us.

Recommendations

USI believes that a lack of standardization in the processing of registrations results in inconsistent outcomes for registrants. As a result:

- USI believes that guidelines on the acceptance and processing of these forms issued by the Minister would simplify access to voter registration. Guidelines to local authority staff could give comfort to registrants.
- USI would be happy to make recommendations to this end and would be happy to work with staff of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government in compiling this document, if needed.
- We believe this could simply be combatted by sending out an information booklet to those who become eligible to vote from their local authority and

published and compiled by the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government. Census data could help inform the process.

- USI recommends that an online facility be set up by the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government to identify the geographic location of polling stations for electoral districts.

Automatic Voter Registration

USI believes that Automatic Voter Registration at the age of eligibility should be undertaken by the Government and the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government. Automatic Voter Registration at the age of eligibility would go a long way to encouraging younger people to exercise their franchise in Ireland. An opt-out could be offered for those who do not wish their details to be included.



Automatic Voter Registration has been proven to improve turnout and has done so in Germany, Finland, Israel, Italy, Switzerland and Chile. It is also currently being debated at the US Congress.⁵

In the United Kingdom, registration is a duty – it is an offence not to provide an electoral registration officer with information – but enforcement is not strict.

Recommendation

- USI recommends the Minister and Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government launch a feasibility study into this practice and its achievability in Ireland.

Voting Rights for Citizens Abroad

USI, as the national advocacy organisation for students and key stakeholders in the role of young people in Ireland, has seen droves of young people leave Ireland in recent years due to emigration and seeking opportunities abroad.



We believe while they have left, many of those who have left have the desire to play a role in their native state and a country they may wish to return to. Notable campaigns such as *#HometoVote* and

⁵ Kamisar, Ben. 'Dem Unveils Automatic Voter Registration Bill'. TheHill. N.p., 2015. Web. 15 June 2015.

#GettheBoat2Vote during the recent marriage equality referendum only goes to highlight the efforts that the Irish abroad can make to play a part in their native country.

USI notes that anyone who still claimed residency in Ireland within 18 months of emigration can still return home to vote and still retain those voting rights for 18 months, yet must return home to exercise this. USI believes that voting at Irish embassies abroad should be made available.

In the recent constitutional convention, those participating voted 78% in favour of the question “Should citizens resident outside the State have the right to vote in Presidential elections?”

Recommendations

- Registered Irish voters overseas could be facilitated to vote at the Irish Embassy, or Consulate. There are currently 115 nations that facilitate voting for their citizens abroad in one form or another. ⁶
- We recommend the Minister for the Environment, Community & Local Government strongly consider implementing this in the lifetime of this Government.

RFA Form Clarity

During voter registration efforts and campaigns, USI noticed certain elements of confusion with the RFA forms.

Recommendations

- The reference to the ‘local Garda Station’ on supplementary registration form RFA2 is confusing. Some new form of words should be found to clarify that the Garda Station referred to is the station local to the address of the registrant.
- Further, it may be worth considering removal of the apparently absolute requirement to attend a Garda Station to have a form stamped – this appears to obviate the possibility of temporary concessions to facilitate registration in other locations such as shopping centres or on campus.

Votes at 16

USI adopts the position to support and advocate a national policy to extend voting rights to those after the age of sixteen. We believe that enfranchising the demographic of those between the ages of sixteen and eighteen to vote will not only

⁶ GlobalIrish.ie: “Factsheet on external voting”. Available at <http://www.globalirish.ie/issues/emigrant-voting/>

encourage those to be active citizens but introduces a capable and able age demographic to play their part in the democratic process and are appreciated in doing so.

Currently, countries such as Argentina, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Brazil, Malta, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, Austria, Switzerland, Scotland and half the regions of Germany all extending voting rights at 16.⁷ After enacting voting rights to those aged 16-18, countries such as Austria and Germany have reported that voter-turnout equals that of older age groups.⁸

Recommendations

The Constitutional Convention passed a resolution in support of extending voting rights at 16 in February 2013. We believe that holding a referendum on this issue sooner rather than later and setting a date to this referendum should be a priority for this Government.

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⁷ Full breakdown of voting rights available at: <http://aceproject.org/epic-en/CDTable?question=VR001-g>

⁸ Voteat16.ie, "Consistency with our European Counterparts..." Available at: http://www.voteat16.ie/nine_reasons